



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

**Brexit: My latest thoughts following this week's votes**

This week saw the House of Commons again extensively debate the issue of the United Kingdom's 'exit' from the European Union and the way forward in terms of delivering that outcome.

The debates and votes spanned three days - Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday - and I think it is worth summarising what happened on each, whilst setting out the context, and explaining my reasoning for voting how I did.

On Tuesday, the 'meaningful vote' returned for its second iteration. As I have written extensively about previously, I do have reservations about the proposed *Withdrawal Agreement* and predominantly amongst those concerns, how it impacts upon Northern Ireland through the 'backstop protocol'. I do not believe that it is acceptable to treat Northern Ireland any differently to the rest of the United Kingdom and I also believe that being stuck in the Customs Union would inhibit the great opportunities that leaving the EU presents us to forge highly beneficial new trading relationships the world over, particularly with the rapidly emerging markets of China, India, and Indonesia, to name but a few, as well as with our European neighbours.

Quite rightly, the Prime Minister, Attorney General and the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, have all been involved in in-depth discussions with the European Union, following the first 'meaningful vote' defeat, seemingly with a breakthrough on Monday night in Strasbourg, which then led to the *Withdrawal Agreement* coming back before the House on Tuesday. I am happy for us to leave with a deal, but it must be the right deal. As such, I wanted those efforts to have culminated in a unilateral exit from the 'backstop', or a legally-binding solution to that challenge. Having waited for, and then read carefully, the Attorney General's legal advice that followed, my concerns were not allayed and with a heavy heart, I felt I had no choice but to again vote against the *Withdrawal Agreement*. In the end, the Government lost that vote by 391 to 242.

This defeat then led to the commitments made last week coming to fruition, and on Wednesday, we had a debate and votes around the issue of taking 'no-deal' off the table - to my mind, a fatally flawed strategy, which decimates the UK's negotiating hand and removes a viable means by which we can



leave the European Union on the 29<sup>th</sup> March 2019, and indeed, at any time. The eventual motion we voted on read:

*“That this House rejects the United Kingdom leaving the European Union without a Withdrawal Agreement and a Framework for the Future Relationship.”*

Again, I have written extensively about ‘no-deal’ in the past, and would again stress that in reality, ‘no-deal’ is not no deal - instead, it is a series of mini agreements, already being put in place, which address specific issues and challenges flowing from our departure. Indeed, we have seen further significant movement on this preparation at the European Union end only this week, as you would expect, because any challenges and difficulties would clearly impact on both the UK and EU side of the Channel. I fully expect we will see further positive movement on this contingency planning in the coming days and weeks.

For these reasons, I voted against taking ‘no-deal’ off the table, but the House voted by a margin of 321 to 278 - a majority of 43 - to remove ‘no-deal’ permanently. Whilst this is not a binding vote, regrettably, this outcome shows the extent to which other MPs oppose leaving without a deal. I vehemently disagree with their reasoning and consider that their actions have severely undermined our negotiating position, whilst removing a viable means of delivering Brexit.

The outcome of this vote then led on Thursday to the House debating and voting on the proposition of seeking an extension to Article 50 beyond our planned 29<sup>th</sup> March 2019 departure date. The motion read:

*“That this House:*

*(1) notes the resolutions of the House of 12 and 13 March, and accordingly agrees that the Government will seek to agree with the European Union an extension of the period specified in Article 50(3);*

*(2) agrees that, if the House has passed a resolution approving the negotiated withdrawal agreement and the framework for the future relationship for the purposes of section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 by 20 March 2019, then the Government will seek to agree with the European Union a one-off extension of the period specified in Article 50(3)*



*for a period ending on 30 June 2019 for the purpose of passing the necessary EU exit legislation; and*

*(3) notes that, if the House has not passed a resolution approving the negotiated withdrawal agreement and the framework for the future relationship for the purposes of section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 by 20 March 2019, then it is highly likely that the European Council at its meeting the following day would require a clear purpose for any extension, not least to determine its length, and that any extension beyond 30 June 2019 would require the United Kingdom to hold European Parliament elections in May 2019.”*

Personally, I want us to leave on the 29<sup>th</sup> March, on time, with or without a deal, and I voted against an extension. Yet again, however, I was on the losing side of that argument and the House voted by 412 to 202 - a majority of 210 - to support discussions to secure an extension to Article 50, should the *Withdrawal Agreement* not be agreed by Parliament by the 20<sup>th</sup> March.

Interestingly, earlier amendments tabled by members from across the House all failed, all of which I voted against, including one to hold a second referendum, which was roundly defeated by 334 to 85 - a majority of 249. The so-called ‘Cooper-Boles-Letwin’, through the amendment in the name of Hilary Benn, which sought authority for Parliament to assume control from the Government over the negotiations, was also rightly defeated, albeit by 314 to 312 - a wafer thin majority of 2. This amendment, and the approach advocated by these MPs, is constitutional vandalism, setting a very dangerous precedent, and so I was delighted to see it defeated.

But what does all this mean?

Well, in short, it is not enough for the House of Commons to just say that it does not want to leave the EU without a deal - the legal default is clear that if an exit agreement hasn’t been reached by the 29<sup>th</sup> March, we leave without a deal: a position the House legislated for through the *EU Withdrawal Act*, and which cannot be changed without legislation. So, as the Prime Minister rightly says, if the House wants to leave with a deal, it has to vote for one, or an extension of our EU membership has to be agreed, although I struggle to see that if the ‘deal’ is not agreed now, having been back and forth on this for months, why would the situation be any different in April, May, June, July, or beyond?



It also means that the Government will now enter into discussions to see if any possible extension to Article 50 can be agreed - that is entirely within the gift of the European Union and they may, or may not, agree to this request. I suspect any extension would come with many conditions and I fear that it could be long - there is some talk of two years, but also as many as five. We will have to see how these discussions progress in the coming days, but I do believe extension is fraught with danger in terms of delivering Brexit.

Essentially, if agreement cannot be reached on the *Withdrawal Agreement*, it seems to me that an extension can only realistically have two outcomes - to deliver a managed 'no-deal' in a few months' time, or to ensure Brexit is eventually cancelled altogether if any extension is longer-term. I know which of the two many MPs will be hoping for.

Meanwhile, the Government is continuing to work tirelessly around the 'backstop protocol' issue and I know that the Attorney General is undertaking further work around his legal advice this weekend. I think many MPs would welcome movement in this regard, and I also understand that intensive talks are ongoing with the Democratic Unionist Party, who have an understandable interest in getting this particular aspect of the *Withdrawal Agreement* right.

We shall see how these discussions progress, but there is press speculation that a third 'meaningful vote' may take place on Tuesday next week, the 19<sup>th</sup> March, which is shortly before the EU Council meeting that is scheduled to also take place next week. It is at that meeting that any extension is likely to be discussed and agreed in principle, and so next week will be a further significant one in this process.

As I have throughout, I will make any decision about how I vote having listened to the debate, having reflected upon the views of my constituents, and having read everything, including the legal advice, thoroughly. I also remain acutely conscious of the fact that our area voted overwhelmingly to leave the European Union - 64% of those in Corby, and 58% in East Northamptonshire - and that the manifesto I was elected on vowed to deliver on this outcome. In fact, over 96% of the votes cast in Corby & East Northamptonshire at the General Election in 2017 were for parties that promised to deliver Brexit - an instruction, not a consultation, and I intend to do just that.

In concluding, I have made this point repeatedly, but will make it again. Parliament yet again proved this week that, despite the things many MPs say, their actions through their votes tell a different



story. We have seen MPs express a strong view that a ‘no-deal’ Brexit should be rejected in all circumstances and removed from our negotiating strategy altogether. We have seen MPs overwhelmingly support a motion giving permission to negotiate an extension to our EU membership. Both of these outcomes only strengthen the hand of the European Union in this process, and I fear move the dial towards, at best frustrating, or at worst cancelling, Brexit altogether. Essentially, the problem is as stark as this - overall, we have a ‘Remain’ leaning Parliament and a ‘Leave’ leaning country. Many MPs pay lip service to doing one thing and actually do another.

In the coming days, I will exercise my votes in a way that protects Brexit, but I can’t deny that this weekend will involve a lot of soul searching about how that is best achieved and where we go from here.

For context, you can find my earlier statements about all this, here:

21<sup>st</sup> December 2018: <https://bit.ly/2TQDZYv>

11<sup>th</sup> January 2019: <https://bit.ly/2T8cNzO>

8<sup>th</sup> February 2019: <https://bit.ly/2Y0HXgo>

4<sup>th</sup> March 2019: <https://bit.ly/2uakhs4>

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