

**TOM PURSGLOVE MP**  
CORBY & EAST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
LONDON SW1A 0AA

11<sup>th</sup> January 2019

*Dear Confront,*

Thank you for your recent correspondence in respect of the proposed European Union (EU) *Withdrawal Agreement*.

I read your comments with great interest and I fully appreciate this is an issue of huge concern for the whole country, and for you personally, as it is for me as your Member of Parliament. It is fair to say that, in recent weeks, I have been inundated with correspondence from a whole array of standpoints - I have read each and every one carefully and reflected upon their contents.

As such, I have written and published the enclosed statement which addresses the many points that have been raised in the correspondence I have received from local people. It is my assessment of where things stand presently, but as I have said, I am conscious that this is a fast paced and fluid situation, and so it is difficult to comment with certainty. I did, however, want to respond to all those who have kindly written to me in advance of the 'meaningful vote' set to be held on the 15<sup>th</sup> January 2019.

Once again, thank you for having taken the time to contact me and if I can ever be of any further assistance to you then please do not hesitate to contact me again.

*With best wishes*

*Tom*

**TOM PURSGLOVE MP**  
**MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT**  
**CORBY & EAST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE**

## My up-to-date thoughts on Brexit, and the way forward

I am so grateful to everyone locally who has let me know their views in recent weeks on the issue of the European Union (EU) Withdrawal Agreement - understandably an issue of huge concern for local people, the country more widely, and for me as your Member of Parliament. It is fair to say that, in recent weeks, I have been inundated with correspondence from a whole array of standpoints - I have read each and every one carefully and reflected upon their contents.

Indeed, I had hoped, and expected, to be able to provide substantive responses on these matters at this time, having cast my vote in the 'meaningful vote' in the House of Commons. Alas, this is not possible, given the decision the Prime Minister took to postpone that vote in order to have further discussions with the European Union.

As you will appreciate, deciding how to vote on this is a huge decision - and perhaps the most significant vote I will ever have to cast in my time as an MP - and before I finally make that decision, I want to make sure I have as much information as possible. I want to continue to read everything I possibly can, listen carefully to the views of my constituents, listen to the debate in the House of Commons and in the country, and then make an informed decision. As you will recognise, this is a very fluid and fast moving situation, and it is impossible to predict what the landscape will look like when this matter comes back before the House in January. Indeed, the House of Commons has not yet even decided how the business will be structured procedurally, and the order or nature of the vote - or votes - and this procedure matters.

I should also be completely upfront at the outset about the political realities we are faced with in trying to deliver the referendum outcome - essentially, we have a 'Remain' leaning Parliament and a very significant number of MPs, whatever they might say publicly, would not shed a tear at the prospect of Brexit not being delivered at all. Indeed, in the last week alone, we have seen some Members of Parliament again calling for a second referendum, a *European Union (Revocation of Notification of Withdrawal) Bill* brought forward by a backbench Labour MP, calls to extend Article 50, and the Chairman of the Brexit Committee openly talking about his amendment to the 'meaningful vote' which, if passed, would not only kill off the PM's agreement, but as I understand it, would also rule out 'no-deal' altogether. Many MPs pay lip-service to their commitment to respecting and delivering the referendum result, but their actions tell a different story. This context also matters.

As such, I wanted to comment upon the many points that have been raised in the correspondence I have received from local people, and that are swirling about in the media more generally. This is my assessment of where things stand - today - but as I have said, I am conscious that this is a fast paced and fluid situation, and so it is difficult to comment with any certainty. Ultimately, these are all hypotheticals at this time.

First, I want to be crystal clear about the fact that my primary consideration is that I am determined to protect Brexit - something I campaigned passionately for back in 2016, and have done so for the entirety of my political life. Before, during and after the referendum, I campaigned for us to leave the European Union, and I am determined that we must deliver on the wishes of the British people. Here in Corby, 64% of voters voted to leave, and in East Northamptonshire, 58% voted to leave. The referendum was not a consultation, but an instruction. That instruction was further confirmed in the 2017 General Election, where the manifesto upon which I stood clearly set out that policy position, and the manifesto of the Labour Party was equally committed to leaving the European Union - those two parties secured 93.9% of the vote in Corby & East Northamptonshire.

I take that instruction incredibly seriously, and it must be delivered upon. I am clear the vote meant:

1. Ending the free-movement of people from the EU and controlling immigration, whilst at the same time delivering a fairer system, which treats people equally, regardless of where they come from in the world.

2. Stopping sending billions and billions of pounds each year to Brussels.
3. Making our own laws in our own country, judged by our own judges.

As I have said throughout, it is against those tests that I will judge any 'exit' agreement put before Parliament.

On the 14<sup>th</sup> November 2018, the Prime Minister came to the House of Commons and announced that she had secured a deal with the European Union that would be put before the House for consideration. Whilst aspects of the agreement are commendable, I have a number of concerns - not least relating to the 'backstop protocol' and its impact upon Northern Ireland, and our ability to leave it unilaterally. To my mind, it is absurd that it is technically easier to leave the European Union than the backstop itself.

Consequently, I have been actively raising my concerns about these matters with the Prime Minister, in two separate meetings, and in a meeting with the Attorney General. I will of course continue to do so, and I think the Prime Minister was right to postpone the 'meaningful vote' on the 11<sup>th</sup> December 2018, in order to have further discussions with the European Union about these matters. These discussions are ongoing.

It has been reported that the Government intends to bring the 'meaningful vote' before the House on the 17<sup>th</sup> January 2019, and I will form a judgement at that time - however, rather like many MPs, my concerns about the backstop are profound and I will also form a judgement about the finalised agreement against the tests I have set out above. At this stage, it is impossible to know exactly what situation we will be confronted with as MPs, and where the debate will be at that time.

In the meantime, a number of alternative ways forward have been suggested in Parliament, public debate, in the correspondence I have received, and in the media. I would like to say something about each.

First, in some quarters it has been suggested that we should simply "cancel Brexit". This is totally unthinkable, would be a complete betrayal of the democratic decision of the British people, and it would damage our democracy irreparably. Frankly, this is wholly unacceptable for obvious reasons and warrants no further comment here.

Second, some maintain that we should hold a second referendum, or a "People's Vote". Unsurprisingly, I am also implacably opposed to this, and have been consistent in that view. We have already had a "People's Vote" back in 2016, and the ballot paper in that referendum presented voters with an unambiguous choice to remain in the EU, or to leave. The consequences of either decision were communicated by campaign groups through a variety of print, audio-visual, and digital media. The Government also sent a booklet to every household in the UK on the benefits of staying in the EU, which also very clearly stated: *"This is your decision. The Government will implement what you decide."*

As in every election, it was up to the electorate to judge the merits of the different arguments, and over 17.4 million voters decided to leave the EU. And, as I have already said, both main political parties also pledged in their manifestos at the General Election in 2017 to respect the EU referendum result, and these parties received over 80 percent of the vote nationally. This followed MPs from across the political spectrum voting 494 to 122 in favour of invoking Article 50 in 2017.

Equally, the Electoral Commission has previously declared that the referendum was delivered without any major issues and that the final result was clear. Therefore, the handling of any allegations regarding campaign spending will not change the fact that the UK is leaving the EU.

Whilst entirely respecting the sincerely held view of those who advocate this approach, I would strongly argue that we tamper with our democratic principles at our peril. Indeed, the political reality is that holding a second referendum would, quite understandably, give the SNP strong agency to argue for, and secure, a second referendum on Scottish independence. This is something I cannot countenance as a proud unionist, and particularly as the MP for Corby, given our town's rich Scottish heritage. In those circumstances, however, I think it would be virtually impossible to resist those calls, in the face of what would be legitimate shouts of double standards. I also believe a second vote would only serve to deepen divisions over this issue, whilst leading to an out of control "best of three" situation. Ultimately, what would the question be? How many options would you have on the ballot paper? Where do you draw the line? Constitutionally, I believe this would put us in a very dangerous and unprecedented place, with many unforeseen consequences. As such, I simply do not support this approach, and nor do the majority of people locally, both those who voted 'Leave' and 'Remain', but who come up to me, week in, week out, and say "just get on with it!".

Third, the 'Norway model' or the European Economic Area (EEA) option has also been suggested as a way forward. Personally, I simply do not believe that this is true to the referendum result, and it falls at many hurdles - not least taking back control of our money, our laws and our borders. I am also not convinced it would be possible to even negotiate and am unclear as to whether those who advocate for it see it as an end, or as a means.

For me, I struggle to believe either the EU, or individual EEA states, would allow a major renegotiation to let the UK in, only for the UK to leave a few years later. If the real aim is for the EEA to be a permanent home for the UK, it comes fraught with dangers, as I well remember both Nick Clegg and David Cameron articulating in the referendum campaign. Let's not forget we are the fifth largest economy in the world.

Alas, what those who support the 'Norway option' should really do is be upfront about their intentions. Far from delivering Brexit, the EEA is a departure lounge for a round-trip flight back to the original destination - namely, rejoining the EU at the first opportunity...

Finally, I want to say something about 'no-deal' - a scenario I do not particularly fear, but which I am not starry-eyed about either. Having consistently argued that 'no-deal' planning should be prioritised and bolstered, I was pleased that the Cabinet agreed earlier this week to ramp preparations up further. Not least because, in any negotiation, you should always be in a strong position to walk away.

I share the view of the Foreign Secretary, who said over the weekend: *"I've always thought that even in a no-deal situation this is a great country, we'll find a way to flourish and prosper. We've faced much bigger challenges in our history."*

Rightly, he added: *"But we shouldn't pretend that there wouldn't be disruption, there wouldn't be risk, and there wouldn't be impact and that's why as a responsible government we have to make all the preparations necessary."*

For many months, 'no-deal' has been unhelpfully characterised by some as *"crashing out"* and often comparisons with cliff-edges have been made. But that does not have to be the case. This is why I think we absolutely should be exploring the 'managed no-deal' approach that is being advocated by some in the Cabinet. But what does this mean in practice?

Well, essentially, we could seek agreement with the EU to adopt the two year 'implementation period' that is contained within the proposed Withdrawal Agreement. That would of course come at a cost and we could reasonably argue, as some leading Brexit figures have, that we will pay half of the £39 billion, that is already an established condition of the proposed Withdrawal Agreement. This would allow us two years of stability to negotiate a free-trade agreement with the European Union, as a former member of the EU, having left on the 29<sup>th</sup> March 2019. Interestingly, this is mutually beneficial and entirely in line with what Donald Tusk, the President of the European Council, has previously stated would be

possible, when he said on the 7<sup>th</sup> March 2018: *“I propose that we aim for a trade agreement covering all sectors and with zero tariffs on goods.”* This to me still seems perfectly achievable, and at the point we conclude a trade deal, we would pay the remainder of the £39 billion commitment, having secured something tangible in exchange for it.

As I have previously said, many aspects of the Prime Minister’s proposed agreement are commendable, including the elements on security cooperation, citizens’ rights and airports. They are also mutually beneficial, uncontroversial, and are all but agreed. These could therefore be lifted from the Withdrawal Agreement and implemented speedily, and in full. Again, I go back to what Mr Tusk said in March of this year:

*“My proposal shows that we don’t want to build a wall between the EU and Britain. On the contrary, the UK will be our closest neighbour and we want to remain friends and partners also after Brexit. Partners that are as close as possible, just like we have said from the very first day after the referendum.*

*And, in this spirit, I propose close cooperation within the following areas.*

*Firstly, as we are confronted with similar security threats, I propose that the EU and the UK continue our common fight against terrorism and international crime. The increasing global instability requires our uninterrupted cooperation in defence and foreign affairs. It is about the security of our citizens, which must be preserved beyond Brexit.*

*Secondly, we invite the UK to participate in EU programmes in the fields of research and innovation, as well as in education and culture. This is key to maintain mutually beneficial and enriching personal networks in these vital areas, and for our community of values to prosper also in future.*

*Thirdly, I am determined to avoid that particularly absurd consequence of Brexit that is the disruption of flights between the UK and the EU. To do so, we must start discussions on this issue as soon as possible.”*

Wherever you stood in the referendum, if you respect the result and the verdict that we should leave the European Union, it is virtually impossible not to see the advantages of this approach, at least as an option. It would deliver Brexit, avoid the “cliff-edge” some fear, provide stability during the implementation, and crucially, is entirely in line with what the European Union has previously said is achievable. That is why this absolutely should be explored as an option, and I am delighted that some of my colleagues in Cabinet are making that case.

As I set out right at the start of my comments, the next few weeks will be important in deciding the future trajectory of our country. This is a very fluid and fast moving situation, and it is impossible to predict what the landscape will look like when this matter comes back before the House in January. Indeed, I should again point out that MPs have not yet decided how the business will be structured procedurally, and the order or nature of the vote - or votes - and this procedure matters. It will dictate the options the House has at its disposal to deliver Brexit; and those options are already very limited, and the parliamentary arithmetic realities I have alluded to are stark. At this stage, I can only comment upon hypothetical scenarios, and that is what I have tried my best to do, in providing an honest appraisal of where I think matters stand - today. Tomorrow, of course, they could be completely different, and I hope you will accept my remarks in that spirit.

In concluding, let me say again that I campaigned passionately for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, and I am determined that that democratic decision must be respected and upheld. As an individual MP, I can only speak for myself, but my primary concern going into 2019 is that **Brexit is protected and delivered.**

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