

# Letter to Brexit Secretary about the Withdrawal Agreement Bill (WAB)

Dear Stephen

I understand the government is considering putting the Withdrawal Agreement Bill to the Commons for a vote on the principles of the Bill following a Second Reading debate. Indeed we were all told to be ready to answer a 3 line whip for this purpose on Thursday, only for this to be postponed.

I understand this is a long and complex piece of constitutional legislation which will require careful study by all those asked to improve or approve it. I would therefore urge you again to publish this Bill as soon as possible so MPs can have an intelligent debate about what it is seeking to do and how it might try to do that. Why the delay in releasing a piece of legislation for scrutiny which the government claims is so important. It must have been drafted for some time, as the draft Agreement it seeks to implement has been settled for many weeks and is not subject to renegotiation according to both the government and the EU.

The legislation presumably seeks to repeal much of the EU Withdrawal Act and will reintroduce the European Communities Act 1972 into the UK constitution to restore all EU powers for a flexible and long transitional period and maybe beyond that. It needs to make provision for the substantial sums of money the draft Agreement commits the UK to pay and for the imposition of new EU law upon the UK. It needs to confirm the powers of the Joint Committee and European Court of Justice in making important decisions about our future government and resolving disputes between the UK and the EU. These are all weighty matters which warrant proper consideration by MPs before any debate and vote on them.

The Bill could be more accurately called the "Delay our exit from the EU " Bill, or " The Reimposition of EU powers "Bill given the requirements of the draft Withdrawal Treaty. The Bill itself would of course need to conform precisely with the Treaty, as the Treaty will be binding in European law anyway.

Yours ever

John

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## Earley St Peter's 175th anniversary

I was invited to St Peter's Church Earley on Sunday afternoon. The local

clergy and the Bishop of Oxford led a service of thanksgiving and commemoration of 175 years of community involvement by the Church. Quite early in its life it helped launch the popular St Peter's School next door. Pupils were present at the service and sang to the congregation.

I thank all involved in organising an excellent service and tea party, and am grateful to the Church and its helpers for all they do for the local community.

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## What answer should the Attorney have sent to my letter about the draft treaty?

When I sent my letter I was still hoping to persuade the government to announce it could not get its Withdrawal Agreement through and to process to the free trade WTO exit route. A good answer would have been along these lines:

Dear John

You are right that in order to try to get an Agreement with the EU the UK did make various compromises. It also asked for an extension to our membership for a 21 month or two year period which came at a price over money and powers. The government thought this the best answer, but it is now clear people and Parliament do not agree.

We are therefore now looking at an expedited exit from the EU without signing the Withdrawal Agreement. We will be tabling a comprehensive free trade proposal, which the EU Commission has indicated it will consider.

Yours etc

I also thought I might get a whitewash brush off letter:

Dear John

Thank you for your letter. Whilst we do not agree with your interpretation of what might happen were we to sign the EU Withdrawal Treaty, I acknowledge as you mainly point out that in the transition period the UK will continue to make budgetary payments and observe EU laws. This seems to the government to be entirely fair and to give the UK more time to adjust to exit. I do not accept we will necessarily be in transition for almost four more years, nor accept that we will have to stay in the customs union indefinitely owing to the backstop provision. The powers and charges that last beyond transition are proportionate and reasonable.

You need to accept that compromises have to be made and this was the best deal the UK government was able to negotiate.

Yours etc

The argument over which of two Ministers might reply indicates to me a certain unhappiness about having to deal with the individual points highlighted in the letter, and a recognition that the draft treaty does indeed keep the UK under the full control of the EU for at least 21 more months and maybe much longer depending on how things work out. It is on any reading a Stay in not a leave agreement. The argument is over how long it might last and what it does to any eventual leaving, given the way it removes many of the UK's best bargaining levers. The backstop threatens permanent customs membership and other clauses have an impact well beyond the next 21 months. It does not unequivocally let us leave at any future date, and binds us in to more EU controls and bills without vote or voice to protest. Under it you can be sure we are locked in on bad terms for an unspecified period, with no easy way out and under huge pressure to sacrifice yet more to try to get out.

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## The latest opinion polls

Looking at the latest European election polls, I am urging the Conservative government to change its approach to our exit from the EU.

A large majority of the public do not see the Withdrawal Agreement as a good deal for the UK, or as Brexit. It unites Remain and Leave voters in opposition.

It is urgent not just for the Conservative party but for our country that either Mrs May accepts the Agreement cannot proceed, or a new PM takes over who starts by telling the EU the Agreement is unacceptable. The Conservative-Labour talks as predicted are not helping either party. We need to leave now, responding positively to the EU offer of talks on a free trade agreement. We should not be holding these European elections as we do not want to have another 5 years as members of the EU. The 2017 Conservative Manifesto was right to say No deal is better than a bad deal, and to propose exit on 29 March 2019.

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# Trust in the establishment? We dont believe you...

One of the big themes of my book is the breakdown in trust in Establishment forecasts, remedies and ability to even identify what people think the problems are. In a healthy democracy there are always sceptics, campaigners trying to change the agenda, and differences of expert opinion. In recent years there has been a bigger reduction in trust in establishment analysis and priorities, allied to more concerted attempts by the establishment to crowd out any alternative narrative or policy approach. They have got better at spinning as they have got worse at managing.

In the area I know best, economic forecasts and policy making, the banking crash and its aftermath was a major knock to confidence in official forecasts and their ability to make policy for prosperity. The widespread adoption of austerity policies, especially the extreme ones in the Euro area, added to the disillusion. It is true that the UK Treasury and Bank had a very disappointing record prior to the Great Recession, but that for many was the final straw.

Most of my adult life I have been a critic of successive Treasury policies by the changing governments who usually perish through economic incompetence. In the 1970s I was urging more prudent policies on spending and borrowing, only to see Labour humiliate our country by having to go for a bail out at the IMF and bring on a nasty recession.

In the 1980s I successfully battled against submitting the UK to the boom bust torture of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism, only to lose the battle at the end of the decade. The scheme did even more damage than I imagined , plunged us into recession and threw the Conservative party out of office for 13 years as a result.

In the period from 2005 I was one of many warning of excessive debt and credit building in the system. After 2007 I was a lonely voice urging a less severe approach to sorting out the banking system, watching the authorities break some banks and trigger another large recession. That threw Labour out of office. Today I remain a critic of the over tight money policy and the damaging tax policy of the current government, which is slowing growth too much.

The Referendum campaign was another major blow to expert opinion and trust in government financial institutions. Their stupid pessimism for the economy if we dared to vote to leave the EU was soon disproved by events. It confirmed critics in thinking official forecasts are politically rigged to suit the establishment.