

My contribution to the debate on the European Union (Withdrawal) Act, 10 January 2019

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): This Parliament is on trial. The public voted very clearly in the people's vote of 2016. They were told by Parliament and the Government, by the remain and leave campaigns, that they—the people—were making the decision. They were promised that this Parliament would get on with the task, and they now say to this Parliament, "Do just that. Get on with it."

The public recall that this Parliament is dominated by Members of Parliament serving in the Labour and the Conservative interests. In the 2017 election, every one of us was elected on a manifesto that made it clear that our parties supported implementing the verdict of the British people. The Conservative manifesto went further and made it very clear that we were going to leave the single market and the customs union, as had been pointed out by both remain and leave campaigns in the referendum. The Labour party manifesto set out an interesting and imaginative trade policy for an independent Britain that is clearly incompatible with staying in the customs union. So, Labour too, along with the Conservatives, said to the public in 2017 that we would be leaving the customs union as well as the European Union when the decision was implemented.

There are many leave voters now who are extremely angry that some Members in this House think they were stupid, think they got their decision wrong, and think they should have to do it again. Many people in the country who voted remain, as well as many who voted leave, think it is high time that this Parliament moved on from every day re-enacting the referendum debate as if it had not happened and thinking that we can go back over the referendum debate and decision because it did not like the answer. All those who stood on a manifesto to leave the European Union should remember that manifesto. Those who deeply regret the decision and did not stand on such a manifesto should still understand that democracy works by the majority making decisions. When a majority has made a decision in a referendum where they were told that they would get what they voted for, it ill behoves anyone in this Parliament to know better than the British public and to presume that this Parliament can take on the British public and stand against them, because we are here to serve that public. We gave them the choice and they made that choice.

I want us to be much more interested in the opportunities that Brexit provides and to have proper debates about all the things the Government should be doing for when we leave, as I trust we will on 30 March 2019. I see nothing in the withdrawal agreement that I like. It is not leaving; it is sentencing us to another 21 to 45 months of these awful, endless debates and repetitions of the referendum arguments as we try to get something from the European Union by way of an agreement over our future partnership, having thrown away most of our best negotiating cards by putting them into the

withdrawal agreement in the form that the European Union wants. That would be ridiculous, and a very large number of leave voters would see it as a complete sell-out. That applies to a very large number of remain voters as well, many of them in my own constituency. They have written to me and said, "For goodness' sake oppose this withdrawal agreement, because while we do not agree with you about the ultimate aim, we are united in thinking this is even worse than just leaving", or, in their case, staying within the European Union. I find myself in agreement with the overwhelming majority of my constituents on this subject. For both those who voted remain and leave, this is a very bad agreement that suits neither side.

The opportunities we should be discussing today in respect of fishing, agriculture and business are very considerable. I again ask my oft-repeated question of the Government: when are they going to publish our new tariff schedule? The United Kingdom can decide how much tariff, if any, to impose on imports into our country. I think that the EU tariff schedule on imports into our country is too high. I proposed to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy that he remove all tariffs on imported components. That would be a huge boost for manufacturing in this country. Instead of having to say to manufacturers that we might end up with some tariffs on components coming in from the EU, because we have to charge the same to everybody, let us be bold and say that we are going to get rid of the tariffs on the components coming in from non-EU sources so that we cheapen the costs of manufacturing in the United Kingdom and give people a better choice on components.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend address the worries of farming families, communities and industries up and down the country facing tariffs on their products going into Europe? This is a £3.15 billion industry facing a very serious tariff threat.

John Redwood: I was going to get on to food, and I will do so immediately as I have been prompted. We run a massive £20 billion a year trade deficit in food with the European Union, and tariff-free food competes all too successfully against some elements of our farming industry. I want the Government to choose a tariff structure on food that provides lower overall tariffs against the rest of the world but produces some tariff against EU production so that we will produce more domestically. I want to cut the food miles. I want to see more of our food being produced and sold domestically. Our domestic market share has plunged seriously during the time we have been in the European Union. I think it was well over 90% in 1972 when we entered, and it is now well under 70%. There is absolutely no reason why we cannot get back there.

We need to know urgently from this Government what tariff protection there is going to be against EU food once we have left; whether they will take advantage of the opportunity to get rid of tariffs on food coming in that we cannot conceivably grow or produce for ourselves; and whether they will lower the average tariff, because some of the tariffs that the EU imposes are eye-wateringly too high, to the detriment of the food consumer. As we will be collecting more tariff revenue in total when we start to impose some tariffs on EU products, we should be having a debate on how we are going to spend

that money. I trust that the Government would rebate it all to British consumers by direct tax cuts of the right kind. There is no reason why the consumer should be worse off, because we are heavy net exporters and we are going to collect an awful lot more tariff revenue on the EU's goods than they are going to collect on ours, unless we do something very radical on our tariff schedule. We therefore need to discuss how to spend that money.

We also need to discuss how we rebuild our fishing industry. I am impatient to get on with this. I do not want it to be delayed. We need to take control of our fish and our fishing industry this year, not sometime, never. Under the withdrawal agreement, we have no idea if and when we would get our fishing industry back. Doubtless it would be in play as something to be negotiated away, because the Government have given everything else away that they might otherwise have used in the negotiation. I want to get on and take back control of the fish now. I want a policy from the DEFRA Secretary on how we can land much more of the fish in the United Kingdom, how we can build our fish processing industries on the back of that, and what kind of arrangements we will have with the neighbouring countries both within and outside the EU whereby we will be free to settle the terms and negotiate our own conditions. This is a huge opportunity. The fishing industry is one of the industries that has been most gravely damaged by our membership of the European Union, and we owe it to our fishing communities around the country to take that opportunity. From landlocked Wokingham, I can assure colleagues from coastal communities that there is huge enthusiasm throughout the country to rebuild our fishing industry and to see those fishing fleets again expand and enable us to land much more of our own fish. We can, at the same time, have a policy that is better on conservation by getting rid of many of the big industrial trawlers that come from the continent. We can get rid of the system where there are discards at sea or, now, the system where people are actually going to be prevented from fishing completely because the fishery cannot be managed sensibly, to the detriment of the fish and the fishermen and women undertaking the work.

There is a huge agenda there. Above all, I want the Government to set out how we are going to spend all the money that we will be saving. The Government say that we are going to give away £39 billion—I think it will be considerably more—under the withdrawal agreement. I would like to take that sum of money, which they have clearly provided for as it is their plan to spend that money, and spend it in the first two years when we come out in March 2019. That would be a 2% boost to our economy—a very welcome Brexit bonus.