

My speech during the debate on Exiting the European Union, 24 November 2020

May I reassure the Opposition that I wanted to make a few comments in this debate, and I submitted a request to participate on my own initiative? I have not received any message from the Whips, either before or during these debates, that I should not make a few remarks. With the permission of the House, I will exercise that democratic right.

I understand that there is a parliamentary game going on and that the Opposition want to extend this debate because there are some other things that they do not want to discuss, but that is a matter for them. Oppositions are quite entitled to use what time is available for their own purposes.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): May I ask the right hon. Gentleman whether the game is not on the Government's side, given that they have withdrawn all their speakers, except for his good self?

John Redwood: On the contrary. As I have just explained, there has been no pressure to withdraw my application. Some of my right hon. and hon. Friends who thought that they were going to speak in the debate have reread the proposal and realised that, given the incisive eloquence we would hear from the Minister, there was absolutely no need for them to come to the Chamber and duplicate and triplicate that. I have been foolish enough to think that I can add something to the Government's case, because I support the measure. The fact that my right hon. and hon. Friends seem to have better things to do shows that they are 100% behind the measure, and just want it to be passed as quickly as possible as they attend to their other duties as busy MPs.

So why do I support these regulations, and why are the Government doing this? The first reason is to take back control. That is what millions of people voted for, and many of us are very frustrated that it still has not happened. As the Minister stated clearly, this is about ensuring that, from 1 January, we in this House, on behalf of the British people, can decide for ourselves within international law what the rules shall be on tariffs, quantitative barriers, restrictions and inducements to trade—and how right that is.

I always find it so disappointing that the Opposition, who now say that they understand the spirit of Brexit and have embraced it, do not believe that they can come up with any single improvement on the great body of European law that has been forced on us over many years. I am more optimistic. Working with the talent on the Government Benches, I can see lots of ways of improving on European law. It can be better, not worse, and more rather than less in the right areas. Surely our trade policy should be geared to the interests and concerns of businesses that back this country by investing and creating jobs in it.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab): I raised a serious point in an intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy

Powell) about the Falkland Islands. Does the right hon. Member agree that the UK family is a large one, including our overseas territories, and we ought to be backing the fishing fleet in the Falkland Islands that are trying to export squid and calamari to the EU? Will he join me on a cross-party basis in urging the UK Government to address the concerns of the Falkland Islands?

John Redwood: Of course I hope we can do things to help the Falkland Islands, as we have over many years. They are clearly part of our family, and blood and treasure have been shed to ensure that they are part of our family, so I above all think that we should do all we can.

From 1 January, we in this House can do the things that are in the power of an independent country. We cannot instruct the EU when we are out of it any more than we could when we were in it. There have been a glittering array of failed issues that we put to the EU on which it did not sympathise with us. We had a series of Governments who were so broken backed that they only ever accepted things that the EU wanted to do and did not try to do anything that we wanted to do, which is why it got so frustrating as a member of that body.

It is about taking back control, and I urge everyone here to be more optimistic about the powers of this House. What is the point of someone being a Member of Parliament if they do not believe that they can improve on anything in the inherited corpus of EU law? Why do the Opposition, on the whole, say, "Everything EU perfect, everything generated in this country rubbish"? It is not plausible, and it is against the spirit of the Brexit majority in this country. They want us to get a grip and do better. If we do not do better, they will change us. That is the joy of Brexit—they, at last, will get back control over us. If the law went wrong in the European Union, it did not matter who was in the Government. Even if they threw the Government out, nothing changed, because the EU would not change the law, whereas if we get the laws wrong, the public will know what to do—they can throw Ministers out.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North): Will the right hon. Member give way?

John Redwood: I am not giving way, because I have a couple of points to make, and I am conscious that many Members wish to make speeches.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab): Where are they then?

John Redwood: There are clearly Members on the Opposition Benches wishing to catch Madam Deputy Speaker's eye.

The second point I want to make is that this is about our balance of trade and our balance of payments. One of the tragedies of our membership of the European Union over nearly 50 years was how we transformed ourselves from an industrial country with a strong farming and fishing industry into one that had been badly damaged by the rules and tariffs that the EU imposed on us and our trade with the rest of the world. It was asymmetric and very cruel.

We lost a large chunk of our motor industry in the first decade of our membership—I think it halved—and we lost a lot of our steel industry. We

moved from being a net exporter of fish to being a heavy net importer, with much of our fish taken by foreign vessels and foreign industry. We have lost a lot of our self-sufficiency in temperate food, because the common agricultural policy did not suit us. State aid, cheap energy and so forth on the continent helped places such as the Netherlands to outcompete us on salads and flowers, for example.

We have a big job to do to rebuild ourselves as an industrial, farming and fishing country that is capable of cutting the food miles, cutting the fish miles and delivering more to ourselves and to our own plates through import substitution.

I hope that from 1 January, if not before, Ministers will use these new powers to review all the restrictions and rules about trade and tariffs and create a British model that is better and fairer to Britain, so that "made in Britain" means something, and more is made in Britain and willingly bought by British people. It is very difficult for the Opposition to oppose that, although they will doubtless try to, because they always want to sell Britain short and to build the EU up to greater heights.

None the less, outside this Chamber there will be great relief to know that at least some people in Parliament wish to see a revival of British fishing, British farming and British industry and to understand that the rules of trade and the skewed subsidies and tariffs against the rest of the world have been extremely damaging to people who want to build businesses and farming activities in the UK and that it is time for a reversal.

I wholeheartedly support this measure. I want to take back control and I urge more MPs to get into the spirit of it, and, instead of cavilling and criticising every move that this country wishes to make to be independent, contribute to the debate about how we can be better.