

My speech during the debate on the European Union (Withdrawal) (No. 2) Act 2019 (Rule of Law)

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Of course the Government and all Members of Parliament must obey the law, but Parliament must also pass wise laws and pass them according to our traditions, practices and rules. I wish to concentrate briefly on the question of the wisdom of the law and urge those who sponsored it to think again in the national interest.

This is no normal law. A normal law applies to everyone in the country equally, there are criminal penalties for those who break the law, and we wish to see the law enforced. This is not that kind of a law. This Act of Parliament is a political instruction to our Prime Minister about how he should behave in an international negotiation. Normally, this Parliament takes the view that international negotiations are best handled in detail by the Government, and we the Parliament judge the result by either approving or disapproving of it.

I urge colleagues to think again, because two things follow from Parliament instructing the Prime Minister in the way it has sought to do over this negotiation. The first is that the EU, the counterparties to the negotiation, can see that this Parliament has deliberately undermined the position of the lead negotiator for our country. It will take note of that, and instead of giving things it will say, "There is no point in giving things." The second thing—even worse—is that the EU will take note that our Prime Minister under this Act is to seek an extension on any terms the EU cares to dictate. How can anyone in this House say that is good law or justice or makes sense for the British people? Those of the remain persuasion, just as those of the leave persuasion, must surely see that this is not the way to treat our lead negotiator—putting our country naked into the negotiating chamber with the EU. It puts the country in a farcical and extremely weak position.

I thought that the Labour party wanted us to leave the EU. Labour Members did not like the withdrawal agreement—I have sympathy with that—but they do not like leaving without the withdrawal agreement—I have less sympathy with that—so they are looking for a third way. They presumably think they could do some other kind of renegotiation, but they have never explained to us what that renegotiation would be like, and they have never explained how the EU would even start talking about it, given that it has consistently said we either take the withdrawal agreement or just leave.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): The Opposition have taken a really bizarre position. They have said that, even if they did manage to negotiate a new deal with the EU, they would campaign against it. It is a really odd position for this nation to be in.

John Redwood: That is even more bizarre. Normally, Governments do their best

negotiation and then come back and recommend it to the House of Commons. It would indeed be fatuous if we ever had a Government in this country who negotiated a deal they knew they wanted to reject. They should not waste everybody's time and just say, "Let's leave without a deal."

We are wandering a little from the point of this debate, which is about the rule of law. This House of Commons should think again. This is an extremely unwise law. It undermines the Prime Minister, but, more importantly, it undermines our country. It makes it extremely unlikely that those remain-supporting MPs who could live with our exit with a variant of the withdrawal agreement will get that because they have deliberately undermined the pressure our Prime Minister may place on the EU in the negotiations he is trying to undertake. Even worse, they have invited the EU to dictate terrible terms for a few months' extension, and why would the EU not do it? Please, Parliament, reconsider. Parliament has a duty to put through wise laws and to represent the national interest. This miserable Act is an act of great political folly and is undermining our country in a very desperate way.