

My speech on the European Union (Withdrawal) (No. 5) Bill

edited speech

Many people outside this House are losing confidence and trust in us and our proceedings. Tonight is another plunge in how they see us, because we are behaving collectively so badly. My right hon. and hon. Friends who have complained about the lack of time for debating both the Bill and the amendments are quite right. This is a serious constitutional matter. We have not been given time to construct proper amendments and there is no time in this brief hour to do justice to the complex issues raised by the Lords amendments. We had but a short debate on the original consideration of the Bill, when I was able to set out some of the constitutional difficulties involved in groups of MPs seizing the agenda and taking over money resolution and Crown prerogative matters. We are not allowed proper time tonight to consider exactly how all that fits with this Bill.

What we do know, however, is that the very slim majority who have got the Bill this far through this House intend to go against the clearly expressed wishes of the British people in the referendum. All those who voted to leave, two years and nine months ago, had every reason to suppose that all Labour and Conservative Members elected on their 2017 manifestos would see through our exit in a timely way. They should also have expected that from the promises made by both the leave and the remain campaigns in the referendum, the legislation put through in granting that referendum, and the clear statement of the Government at the time, who said that we would implement the wishes of the British people. The Opposition did not dissent from that particular view when the Government put out their leaflet. Indeed, during the remain campaign many Labour MPs endorsed the Government. That is why tonight is another sad night. This Parliament is breaking its word, breaking its promises and letting down 17.4 million voters, but it is also letting down quite a lot of remain voters.

A lot of remain voters are good democrats who fully accept the verdict of the British people. Quite a lot of people in our country were only just remain voters or only just leave voters and are prepared to live with the judgment of the majority. They too are scandalised that this Parliament is insisting on a second needless delay when we have had two years and nine months to prepare for exit and when our Government assure us that they are fully prepared for exiting without signing the withdrawal agreement.

I find it very odd that Members of this House think that the withdrawal agreement is, in itself, Brexit or in any way helps Brexit. The withdrawal agreement is a massively long delay to our exit, with the added problem, which the Opposition have rightly identified, that it entails signing up to a solemn and binding international treaty to undermine our bargaining position in the second part of the negotiations envisaged by the EU's process.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an extremely good speech. Is he aware that, as I have been informed today, the withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill, which is supposed to put this appalling withdrawal agreement into domestic law, is around 120 pages long? That is what we are heading for in the next couple of weeks.

John Redwood My hon. Friend is right. The nature of that solemn and binding treaty will be to lock us in, for 21 or 45 months, to every feature of the European Union without representation, vote or voice. It might mean that we end up in large sections of it—the customs union and single market alignment—in perpetuity, thanks to the Irish backstop.

It is a massive delay, and I say to my hon. and right hon. Friends on the Front Bench that, if they are offering the public either a guaranteed delay under the withdrawal agreement or a shorter delay that they wish to negotiate, a lot of leave voters would rather have the shorter delay. All of us leave voters do not want any delay at all. That is why people will be scandalised by what this House is rushing through again this evening.

The shortage of time is completely scandalous. This is a massive issue that has gripped the nation for many months. It dominates the news media, it sucks the life out of this House on every other issue and now, when we come to this big crunch event and when leave had been led to believe that we would be leaving the European Union without an agreement if necessary, they are told at the last minute, for the second time, that all their hopes for their democratic outcome will be dashed again. This Parliament does that with grave danger to its reputation.

I urge all those who wish to get this lightning legislation through again to ask themselves what they are going to say to all their leave voters, and what they are going to say to their remain voters who are also democrats and who join leave voters in saying, "Get on with it. Get it over with. Why do we have to sit through month after month of the same people making the same points that they put to a referendum and lost?"

This Parliament needs to wake up and get real. It needs to move on. It needs to rise to the nation's requirements and deal with the nation's other business, and it needs to accept that this was decided by the public. It is our duty to implement it. Leaving without this agreement is going to be just fine. We are prepared for it. Business is ready for it. Business has spent money. Business has done whatever it needed to do and, in many cases, feels very let down that it is not able to use all its contingencies, on which it has spent good money.

I would say this to all Labour MPs, particularly those with a majority of leave voters in their constituency: understand the damage you are doing, understand the damage you are doing to this institution, understand the damage you are doing to our democracy and vote for us to leave the European Union.