

Parliament cannot be the executive

There are good reasons why governments propose and Parliament approves, improves or rejects. Parliament is well set up to challenge government, hold it to account, modify or remove its more foolish measures. Parliament is not set up to run competing policies, competing budgets and competing legislative programmes. That way chaos lies.

The rules of Parliament give certain advantages to the executive to allow budgets to be set and policies to be pursued. Those who divide up the jobs within the executive have to show they are in charge of the ruling party or governing coalition, and can command the House on big votes. It would not be wise to change all these rules today just because this particular government lost its way on its Brexit negotiations and lost its Agreement by ignoring many of its own usually loyal supporters. If Labour is serious about wanting to run the government in the future it is also not in their interests to create a Parliament which cannot accept government on any sustained and consistent basis.

When I told Parliament last week it is on trial, I meant it. The public are showing their disapproval at the negative approach of Parliament to Brexit and good government. They dislike the failure so far to deliver a good policy in the national interest to fulfil the promises made on Brexit during the referendum and in the 2017 election. These promises were made by both main national parties that hold the bulk of the seats in the Commons.

We have learned a few things over the last week. We now know there are 110 Conservative Eurosceptics – and 8 Remain Conservatives – prepared to defy a 3 line whip against a bad deal and bad policy towards Brexit. We know there are 71 Labour MPs who defy their leader by demanding a second referendum. Mrs May would be unwise to do a deal with them, the SNP and Lib Dems for a second referendum, as between them they would be fewer MPs than the 110 plus the 10 DUP she would lose over it.

I hear repeatedly there is no majority for leaving without a deal in Parliament. That is clearly right, were Parliament to have an academic motion on that topic. If, however, Parliament wants to stop Brexit without a deal, the only way is Brexit with a deal. No grouping within the Commons has come up with a possible deal that would both be agreeable to the EU and would command a majority of the Commons. It is also no use the Commons voting for some vague proposal if the government, charged with the task of actually negotiating with the EU thinks it undesirable or unachievable. The Commons rightly condemned a very bad deal this week. It has previously legislated to leave. So what then is the deal that could achieve the stated aim of those who want to leave with a deal?

The ERG favours the government tabling a comprehensive Free Trade Agreement as soon as possible. If the EU then agree to negotiate such an FTA after we have left in March this year, the WTO would let us carry on trading on tariff free terms similar to today whilst we sought to finalise an FTA. That looks

like the best way forward to leave with a deal.