

Speech: PM statement at the EU Council: 21 March 2019

I have just met with Donald Tusk following the EU Council's discussion on the UK's request for the approval of the Strasbourg supplementary documents and for a short extension to the Article 50 process.

Firstly I welcome the Council's approval of the legally-binding assurances in relation to the Northern Ireland backstop which I negotiated with President Juncker last week.

This should give extra assurance to Parliament that, in the unlikely event the backstop is ever used, it will only be temporary; and that the UK and the EU will begin work immediately to replace the backstop with alternative arrangements by the end of December 2020.

After a lengthy discussion, the council today also agreed, subject to a successful vote next week, that in order to provide time for the UK Parliament to agree and ratify a Brexit deal, the date of our departure will now be extended to 22 May.

If Parliament does not agree a deal next week, the EU Council will extend Article 50 until 12 April. At this point we would either leave with no deal, or put forward an alternative plan.

If this involved a further extension it would mean participation in the European Parliamentary elections.

As I have said previously, I believe strongly that it would be wrong to ask people in the UK to participate in these elections three years after voting to leave the EU.

What the decision today underlines is the importance of the House of Commons passing a Brexit deal next week so that we can bring an end to the uncertainty and leave in a smooth and orderly manner.

Tomorrow morning, I will be returning to the UK and working hard to build support for getting the deal through.

I know MPs on all sides of the debate have passionate views, and I respect those different positions.

Last night I expressed my frustration. I know that MPs are frustrated too. They have difficult jobs to do.

I hope we can all agree, we are now at the moment of decision.

I will make every effort to ensure that we are able to leave with a deal and move our country forward.