

Speech: PM statement on European Council: 25 March 2019

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a Statement on last week's European Council.

Before the Council, I wrote to President Tusk to seek formal approval for the legally-binding assurances on the Northern Ireland backstop and Alternative Arrangements agreed in Strasbourg on 11th March. I reported your Statement, Mr Speaker, which made clear that for a further Meaningful Vote to take place, the deal would have to be "fundamentally different – not different in terms of wording, but different in terms of substance."

I explained that, as a result, some Honourable and Right Honourable Members were seeking further changes to the Withdrawal Agreement.

And I requested a short extension to the Article 50 process to 30th June. I regret having to do so. I wanted to deliver Brexit on 29th March. But I am conscious of my duties as Prime Minister to all parts of our United Kingdom and of the damage to that Union leaving without a deal could do when one part of it is without devolved government and unable therefore to prepare properly.

The Council formally endorsed the legal Instrument relating to the Withdrawal Agreement and the Joint Statement supplementing the Political Declaration.

This should increase the confidence of the House that the backstop is unlikely ever to be used, and would only be temporary if it is.

But the Council also reiterated, once again, its longstanding position that there could be no reopening of the Withdrawal Agreement.

So however the House decides to proceed this week, everyone should be absolutely clear that changing the Withdrawal Agreement is simply not an option.

Turning to extending Article 50, this has always required the unanimous agreement of the other 27 Member States.

As I have made clear before, it was never guaranteed that the EU would agree to an extension – or the terms on which we requested it.

And they did not.

Instead the Council agreed that if the House approves the Withdrawal Agreement this week, our departure will be extended to 11pm on 22nd May.

This will allow time for Parliament to pass the Withdrawal Agreement Bill, which is legally necessary for the deal to be ratified.

But if the House does not approve the Withdrawal Agreement this week, our departure will instead be extended only to 11pm on 12th April.

At this point we would either leave with No Deal, or we would "indicate a way forward before this date for consideration by the European Council".

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

The Council's Conclusions were subsequently turned into a legal Decision, with which the UK agreed, and which came into force last Friday.

So while the Government has today laid a Statutory Instrument, which will be debated later this week, to reflect this in our own domestic legislation, the date for our departure from the EU has now changed in international law.

Were the House not to pass the Statutory Instrument, it would cause legal confusion and damaging uncertainty, but it would not have any effect on the date of our exit.

Mr Speaker, I continue to believe that the right path forward is for the United Kingdom to leave the EU as soon as possible with a deal, now on 22nd May.

But it is with great regret that I have had to conclude that as things stand, there is still not sufficient support in the House to bring back the deal for a third Meaningful Vote.

I continue to have discussions with colleagues across the House to build support, so that we can bring the vote forward this week, and guarantee Brexit.

If we cannot, the Government made a commitment that we would work across the House to find a majority on a way forward.

The amendment in the name of my Right Honourable Friend the Member for West Dorset seeks to provide for this process by taking control of the Order Paper. I continue to believe doing so would be an unwelcome precedent to set, which would overturn the balance of our democratic institutions.

So the Government will oppose this amendment this evening, but in order to fulfil our commitments to this House would seek to provide government time in order for this process to proceed.

It would be for this House to put forward options for consideration, and to determine the procedure by which they wished to do so.

I must confess that I am sceptical about such a process of indicative votes.

When we have tried this kind of thing in the past, it has produced contradictory outcomes or no outcome at all. There is a further risk when it comes to Brexit, as the UK is only one half of the equation and the votes could lead to an outcome that is unnegotiable with the EU.

No Government could give a blank cheque to commit to an outcome without knowing what it is.

So I cannot commit the Government to delivering the outcome of any votes held by this house. But I do commit to engaging constructively with this process.

There are many different views on the way forward, but I want to explain the options as I understand them.

The default outcome continues to be to leave with No Deal.

But this house has previously expressed its opposition to that path, and may very well do so again this week.

The alternative is to pursue a different form of Brexit or a Second Referendum.

But the bottom line remains, if the House does not approve the Withdrawal Agreement this week, and is not prepared to countenance leaving without a deal we will have to seek a longer extension. This would entail the UK having to hold European Elections. And it would mean that we will not have been able to guarantee Brexit.

These are now choices the House will have the opportunity to express its view on.

Mr Speaker, this is the first chance I have had to address the House since my remarks last Wednesday evening.

I expressed my frustration with our collective failure to take a decision, but I know that many Members across this House are frustrated too.

We all have difficult jobs to do.

People on all sides of the debate hold passionate views and I respect those differences.

I would also like to thank all of those colleagues that have supported the deal so far, and those that have taken the time to meet with me to discuss their concerns.

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

And in doing so we must confront the reality of the hard choices before us.

Unless this House agrees to it, No Deal will not happen.

No Brexit must not happen.

And a slow Brexit which extends Article 50 beyond 22nd May, forces the British people to take part in European Elections and gives up control of any of our borders, laws, money or trade is not a Brexit that will bring the British people together.

I know that the Deal I have put forward is a compromise. It seeks to deliver on the referendum and retain trust in our democracy, while also respecting the concerns of those who voted to remain.

But if this House can back it, we could be out of the European Union in less than two months.

There would be no further extensions, no threat to Brexit and no risk of a No Deal.

That I believe is the way to deliver the Brexit the British people voted for.

And I commend this Statement to the House.