

Statement by Michel Barnier at the European Parliament Plenary session

Thank you, Mr. President.

Good morning to each and every one of you, on this particularly serious morning in the long process of negotiations.

My first words, Madame Minister, Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen, are to tell you again, on behalf of the team I am honoured to lead, with the trust of President Juncker, my gratitude – which is sincere and long lasting – for the trust that the Parliament has shown us, and has shown me. This trust does not fall from the sky, it is not artificial, it is not given like a blank cheque, but it is founded on dialogue and transparency, since the very first day. It will remain that way.

Last night's vote in the House of Commons prolongs and worsens the major uncertainty that was created almost three years ago now by the sovereign decision – which we respect but regret – of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union. This uncertainty affects, of course, the United Kingdom, and Northern Ireland in particular, but also each of our countries and ourselves.

I would like to recall that the responsibility for taking the decision of Brexit lies solely with the United Kingdom. And today, it is the United Kingdom who has the biggest responsibility in finding a way out of the impasse in which we find this negotiation. This is what the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, recalled clearly and forcefully last night immediately after the vote.

During this negotiation, we worked together to find solutions to each problem – of which there are many created by Brexit: human and social problems, technical and legal problems, economic and financial problems – and to manage all the consequences to ensure that the United Kingdom leaves in an orderly manner.

From the first day of this negotiation, the European Union's objective has indeed been to reduce this uncertainty by ensuring the United Kingdom's orderly withdrawal, and on the basis of trust created by this orderly withdrawal, taking the time – time which will be necessarily limited to between 21 months and 4 years – for another negotiation, which I've always said is more important, on the future relationship which we want to build with the United Kingdom, who will in all circumstances remain our friend, ally and partner.

That is what we did while negotiating over the past months – with and never against the British government – a Withdrawal Agreement that is in the interest of citizens, businesses, and all stakeholders on either side of the Channel and Irish Sea.

I would like to simply recall to everybody : if the United Kingdom still wants to leave the European Union and leave it in an orderly fashion, then this treaty that we negotiated with Theresa May's government over the past year and a half remains the only treaty available.

Once again, alongside this treaty, we have done a lot of work these last days at the request of the British government to explain, clarify, and to guarantee, through two documents on which we reached an agreement on Monday evening, Mr. President, here in the European Parliament, which welcomed us. Ms. May had also clarified that she wanted to publish a unilateral declaration on the UK side.

What was this final discussion between the EU and UK government about?

– To give the British Parliament new clarifications and assurances on the temporary nature of the backstop.

We went as far as we could to help the British government get the support of the House of Commons.

Our permanent worry, which I also expressed on your behalf, is to preserve in all scenarios peace and stability on the island of Ireland, to respect in all dimensions the Good Friday / Belfast Agreement. And to preserve the integrity of our Single Market, i.e. to preserve quality and safety, particularly in food, which our consumers have a right to, to preserve national budgets and the European budget, which requires fiscal controls, and to preserve the safety of our businesses when it comes to the respect of rules and standards on imported products.

This is not a theoretical or dogmatic question, but an extremely practical question which affects peace in Ireland, which must be permanent, and the protection of the Single Market. Any product, or live animal, that enters Northern Ireland after Brexit, coming from Great Britain, also enters Poland, Slovenia, Belgium, Germany, in each of our countries. We therefore need to find the way to operationalise these controls for the three aspects I mentioned: consumers, budgets, businesses, obviously without recreating a hard border.

On last night's vote, I noted that certain MPs who want a second referendum or prefer a "no-deal" scenario both belittled the legal guarantees that we agreed on in our discussion with Theresa May. But these guarantees were significant and we agreed them with the support of the British government on Monday evening.

President Juncker also said it: there will be no additional assurances or interpretations. We can not go any further.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The votes announced by the Prime Minister on no deal and a possible extension of the negotiation will take place in the House of Commons tonight and tomorrow.

Following these votes, it will be for the British government to tell us – I hope positively – how it wishes to proceed, to finally bring together a constructive majority for a proposal. It is the UK's responsibility to tell us what it wants for our future relationship, what its choice is, what its clear line is.

We must now ask that question before asking about any possible extension. Extending the negotiation: for what reason? The Article 50 negotiation is now over. We have the treaty. It is here.

We are in a very serious moment because the risk of no deal has never been higher, including an accidental no deal. I recommend that nobody underestimates this risk or its consequences.

Together, we call on all persons concerned to prepare. And on our side, we are preparing.

We do not want this scenario, we have always worked for a deal and an orderly withdrawal, but the European Union is ready to deal with this situation.

I would like to recall that in the absence of an agreed solution, it will be a no deal situation, by the simple operation of the treaties.

As I am asked: "Are you disappointed by this vote?", our answer shall always remain the same.

We remain respectful of the UK and its people.

We remain determined, calm and united.

And we will remain respectful, calm, determined and united until the end of this extraordinary negotiation.

We shall defend the Union's interests and that of all of its citizens.

This will remain the line of your negotiator.

Thank you very much.