

Statement to Parliament: PM statement on European Council: 6 February 2017

Mr Speaker, before I turn to the European Council, I am sure the whole House will want to join me in sending our congratulations to Her Majesty the Queen as she marks her Sapphire Jubilee today.

It is testament to Her Majesty's selfless devotion to the nation that she is not marking becoming our first Monarch to reign for sixty-five years with any special celebration, but instead by getting on with the job to which she has dedicated her life.

On behalf of the whole country, I am proud to offer Her Majesty our humble thanks for a lifetime of extraordinary service. Long may she continue to reign over us all.

Turning to last week's informal European Council in Malta, Britain is leaving the European Union but we are not leaving Europe – and a global Britain that stands tall in the world, will be a Britain that remains a good friend and ally to all our European partners.

So at this summit, we showed how Britain will continue to play a leading role in Europe long after we have left the EU.

In particular, through our contribution to the challenge of managing mass migration; through our Special Relationship with America – and through the new and equal partnership that we want to build between the EU and an independent, self-governing, global Britain.

Let me take each in turn.

Migration

First, on migration, the discussion focused in particular on the route from Libya across the central Mediterranean.

As I have argued, we need a comprehensive and co-ordinated approach – and that is exactly what this council agreed.

This includes working hard in support of an inclusive political settlement to stabilise Libya, which will not only help to tackle migration flows but also counter terrorism.

It means working to reduce the pull factors that encourage people to risk their lives, building the capacity of the Libyans to return migrants to their own shores, treat them with dignity and help them return home.

It means looking beyond Libya and moving further upstream, including by urgently implementing the EU's External Investment Plan to help create more

opportunities in migrants' home countries – and by helping genuine refugees to claim asylum in the first safe country they reach.

And it means better distinguishing between economic migrants and refugees, swiftly returning those who have no right to remain and thereby sending out a deterrence message to others thinking of embarking on perilous journeys.

And the council agreed action in all of these areas.

Britain is already playing a leading role in the region and at this summit I announced further steps including additional support for the Libyan coastguard and more than £30 million of new aid for the most vulnerable refugees across Greece, the Balkans, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Sudan and Libya.

Britain is also setting up an £8 million special protection fund to keep men, women and children in the Mediterranean region safe from trafficking, sexual violence and labour exploitation as part of our commitment to tackle modern slavery.

And the council agreed with my call that we should do everything possible to deter this horrific crime, including by introducing tough penalties for those who trade in human misery and by working together to secure the necessary evidence for prosecutions that can put these criminals behind bars where they belong.

America

Mr Speaker, turning to America, I opened a discussion on engaging the new administration and I was able to relay the conversation I had with President Trump at the White House about the important history of co-operation between the United States and the countries of Europe.

In particular, I confirmed that the President had declared his 100 per cent commitment to NATO as the cornerstone of our security in the West.

But I also made clear that every country needs to share the burden and play its full part, meeting the NATO target of spending 2 per cent on defence. Because, Mr Speaker, it is only by investing properly in our defence that we can ensure we are properly equipped to keep our people safe.

I was also able to relay my discussions with President Trump on the importance of maintaining the sanctions regime on Russia in response to its actions in Ukraine.

And I very much welcome the strong words last week from the new US ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, in confirming America's continued support for these sanctions.

Mr Speaker, of course, there are some areas where we disagree with the approach of the new administration. And we should be clear about those disagreements and about the values that underpin our response to the global

challenges that we face.

But I also argued at this council that we should engage patiently and constructively with America as a friend and ally – an ally that has helped guarantee the longest period of peace that Europe has ever known.

For we should be clear, Mr Speaker, that the alternative of division and confrontation would only embolden those who would do us harm, wherever they may be.

Brexit

Finally turning to Brexit, European leaders welcomed the clarity of the objectives that we have set out for the negotiation ahead.

They warmly welcomed our ambition to build a new partnership between Britain and the European Union that is in the interests of both sides. They also welcomed the recognition that we in Britain want to see a strong and successful European Union, because that is in our interests and the interests of the whole world.

On the issue of acquired rights, the general view was that we should reach an agreement which applied equally to the other 27 member states and the UK, which is why we think a unilateral decision from the UK is not the right way forward.

But as I have said before, EU citizens living in the UK make a vital contribution to our economy and our society and without them we would be poorer and our public services weaker.

So we will make securing the reciprocal agreement that will guarantee their status a priority as soon as the negotiations begin, and I want to see this agreed as soon as possible because that is in everyone's interests.

Mr Speaker, our European partners now want to get on with the negotiations.

So do I.

And so does this House, which last week voted by a majority of 384 in support of the government triggering Article 50.

There are of course further stages for the Bill in Committee and in the other place. And it is right that this process should be completed properly.

But, Mr Speaker, the message is clear to all.

This House has spoken. And now is not the time to obstruct the democratically expressed wishes of the British people.

It is time to get on with leaving the European Union and building an independent, self-governing, global Britain.

And I commend this Statement to the House