

The EU talks are not going anywhere – let's table a free trade agreement

It's been good having three days off from Brexit on this blog. Parliament and the UK media need to remember there are many important tasks and debates we need to have about problems in our country that should not be driven out by endless and repetitious arguments about the terms and timing of our departure from the EU. I seek to make sure my work as an MP is not unbalanced by Brexit which takes up too much Parliamentary time.

Over the last few days there has been little progress with the UK Parliament's wish to see the Withdrawal Agreement renegotiated. The EU appears to rule out removing the backstop from the Agreement, which in turn seems to rule out Parliament approving it. For some of us it is far more than the backstop that is wrong with the Agreement anyway. Why would we want to sign a one sided agreement giving the EU all it wants, without anything firm on the future partnership which might contain things we want? Far from leaving the EU signing the Agreement means delay in taking back control of our money, our laws, and our borders, with genuine issues about whether we would ever be in full control given the backstop and the financial commitments.

The best approach from here is straightforward. The government has to tell the EU there is no chance of passing the current Withdrawal Agreement, whatever might be offered by side letters, reassurance, clarifications or strengthening of the Political Declaration about a possible future agreement. It is also true many MPs do not want to leave with no agreement, so the government should table a comprehensive free trade agreement. Under GATT rules if the EU agrees to talk about this the UK can then leave the EU on 29 March without needing to impose new tariff and non tariff barriers on EU exports to us, and the EU would do the same for our exports to them. There is a period of up to 10 years to agree a final text of a replacement Free Trade Agreement. There is now a private sector draft, but the government itself could scissors and paste EU/Japan and EU/Canada as the starting text.

Any kind of Withdrawal Agreement would leave the UK very exposed. There would be endless more months of rows with the EU, and rows in Parliament over how the talks should be handled by the UK. Meanwhile the EU could legislate any way it wished to damage UK interests as leverage, whilst continuing to charge us large and unspecified sums for the privilege of more talks.