

Two offers of delay

The Withdrawal Agreement is a deliberate expensive delay. It means we do not take back control of our laws, or our money or our borders for at least 21 months, and probably for 45 months under the extension built into it. That would take us well beyond the next General election, and would mean no Brexit for six and half years from the referendum! Remain forces would be then be arguing the referendum was out of date and we have to just accept staying in. It also means trying to negotiate our eventual way out under duress, with the EU pocketing all they want in the Withdrawal Agreement and likely to demand even more sacrifices for little in return. There would also be the backstop, likely to keep us in the customs union in perpetuity.

There is then the nebulous "long delay" of recent briefings. No time limit, no price, no legal basis has been set out, because of course there is no such agreement as yet. Does it come with continuing full membership? If so they would have to fight the European elections, which the two main parties have no wish to do. Or would it come with some new lesser status, in which case it will need elaborate UK legislation and a new Treaty like the Withdrawal Treaty Parliament has twice rejected.?

So there we have it. An actual very expensive long delay which Parliament rejects, or a theoretical long delay which the 188 Conservative MPs who voted against delay could not accept. What a silly idea that we have to choose between a disaster and phantom.

The default option remains leaving without signing the Withdrawal Agreement, which remains the best option. Then we could get on immediately under EU rules with negotiating a free trade agreement with them. The government should table one now to avoid new tariffs and barriers if the EU agrees to negotiate an FTA.