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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 14 January 2019

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Vanguard-class Life Extension Programme

1. **Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the financial sustainability of the Vanguard-class life extension programme.

[908521]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson):

The Vanguard-class life extension and availability sustainment programmes are essential to maintaining the United Kingdom's continuous at-sea deterrence and are prioritised accordingly. The programmes are managed using established Ministry of Defence processes and, as such, are routinely reviewed.

Mr Jones: April this year marks the 50th anniversary of continuous at-sea deterrence, and I pay tribute to the men and women of the submarine service for their dedication over those 50 years. Given the reported delays in the refurbishment programme of the Vanguard class, can the Secretary of State assure the House that CASD will be maintained into the future?

Gavin Williamson: The right hon. Gentleman is right to pay tribute to the men and women, both past and present, who have done so much to maintain that at-sea nuclear deterrence. I can give him an absolute assurance that the investment and resources that are needed are being made available to maintain this important deterrence, which has always had a lot of cross-party support.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): When my right hon. Friend considers the financial sustainability of the Vanguard programme, does he also consider the question of the nuclear doctrine? When was it last revised and on what basis would he reconsider revising it?

Gavin Williamson: This is something that has to be continuously revised and looked at not just by our Department, but right across the Government, and that is always ongoing.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): As the doyenne of British nuclear history, Lord Hennessy, observed recently, the current Vanguard life extension plans are a “technological leap in the dark”,

which also means there is little room for flexibility in the overhaul and procurement cycle if CASD is to be maintained with two submarines in 2033-34. What discussions has the Secretary of State had in his Department about contingencies around the Vanguard-to-Dreadnought transition, which we know were discussed during the previous transition to Vanguard?

Gavin Williamson: We constantly have discussions right across Government to make sure that our continuous at-sea nuclear deterrence can be sustained. We have been investing in technology and parts to make sure that the Vanguard class has everything it needs in the future. But what is critical is the investment we are making: we announced earlier this year an additional £400 million of investment in the Dreadnought class to make sure that is delivered on time and to budget.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: But I am afraid to say that, as the misery of the modernising defence programme has shown all of us, the Secretary of State's Department has much less latitude with large projects than he would like. With the nuclear project sucking up money, as he has just mentioned, from all other lines of spending, how long will it be before this overpriced nuclear weapons programme gets within sight of the Chief Secretary to the Treasury's white elephant hunt across the Government?

Gavin Williamson: When I look around this Chamber, I see many Members on both sides of the House who are absolute supporters of the importance of the continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent and understand how vital it is to keeping Britain safe. That unites both the main parties, and will continue to do so in the long term when we deliver Dreadnought.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that Vanguard—and indeed Dreadnought, the next generation of our CASD programme—is probably the best weapon for peace the world has ever had? Will he update the House on plans to celebrate CASD's 50th anniversary, which will be my birthday, too—we are almost twins?

Gavin Williamson: I cannot imagine either CASD or my hon. Friend reaching 50, and I think we should put my hon. Friend on one of the submarines as part of that celebration. The anniversary shows that our nuclear deterrent has kept Britain, and also our NATO partners, safe over 50 years.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. Before we proceed, I feel sure that colleagues throughout the House will wish to join me in extending this afternoon a very warm welcome to the Speaker of the Malaysian Parliament, Mohamad Ariff, whom I had the privilege of welcoming to the Speaker's briefing meeting this morning—welcome to you, Sir, and to your colleagues—and a similarly warm and effusive welcome to the Speaker of the Australian

House of Representatives, the right hon. Tony Smith. Sir, you are welcome; thank you for joining us and we wish you well in your important work.

Illegal Drone Use: Airports

2. **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support civilian authorities to tackle illegal drone use at and around UK airports. [908522]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): The Ministry of Defence rapidly deployed counter-unmanned air systems capability in support of Sussex police and the Metropolitan police, both at Gatwick and at Heathrow. We are working with colleagues in the Department for Transport and across the Government, and will continue to do so.

Henry Smith: I would like to convey the sincere thanks of the Gatwick management to the Ministry of Defence for its swift action last month during the drone incursion, and I can confirm that they have now bought a very similar system for future use. May I have an assurance that the MOD remains on standby to assist civilian airfields in these situations?

Stuart Andrew: I join my hon. Friend in thanking the RAF for its work. It worked incredibly quickly to get to both Gatwick and Heathrow. Of course, our armed forces are always ready to respond, should they need to, but it should be said that responsibility for drone activity at civilian airports lies with the airport operators.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I have today received a parliamentary answer revealing that no Transport Minister visited Gatwick during the drone crisis. Can the hon. Gentleman tell us what contingency plans his own Department had for dealing with drones at airports? Will he also tell us on what date the Transport Department—or, indeed, the Cabinet Office—asked the MOD for help and support during the crisis? How did his Department respond, and when?

Mr Speaker: I say to the right hon. Gentleman in good spirit that he is uniquely talented in delivering an oral question as though it were of the written variety.

Stuart Andrew: I was pleased to go to Heathrow myself just last week—[HON. MEMBERS: “Gatwick.”] I know, but I personally went to Heathrow last week. We responded to the request that we received from Sussex police on 20 December and we have been working with colleagues across the Government, and with the Department for Transport, to ensure that we have all the availability that is needed, and that the airports have the proper advice that they require so that they can get the systems they need to ensure that they can protect their own runways.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Ah, the good doctor! I call Dr Julian Lewis.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Ministry of Defence is evidently well prepared to respond very quickly to drone threats, once it is asked for assistance,

but can the Minister explain the policy whereby installations are not already in place and a crisis has to arise before that assistance is deployed to the airports?

Stuart Andrew: As I was saying, the protection of airports is in fact an issue for those airports. I know that the Department for Transport is working with airfields across the country to ensure that they have the protections they need. The response by the MOD was incredibly swift, and I pay tribute to it for that.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is it not time that this Government took drones seriously? The fact is that drone technology is advancing very quickly. This is going to be the way in which we wage wars, and the Americans, the Chinese and the Russians are all investing in the technology. Even in our airports, drones present a great danger that we should address immediately.

Stuart Andrew: We are taking this very seriously. The Ministry of Defence has been working on this over the past couple of years, and we are of course working with our allies to ensure that we have the very best technology to protect our armed forces and keep this country safe.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Does the military actually have radar that is capable of identifying something that is, say, 50 cm across?

Stuart Andrew: I obviously cannot go into the details of the capability that we have—I do not think that that would be sensible for the security of our country—but, having visited the system that is in place at Heathrow, I can say that it is incredibly effective.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): The recent drone intrusions at Gatwick and Heathrow were highly embarrassing and created great inconvenience for thousands of passengers but, more importantly, they presented a real and significant security risk. We are all indebted to the armed forces personnel who worked to tackle those intrusions, but we clearly need a long-term solution to this growing challenge. Will the Minister tell us why it is taking the Government so long to bring forward regulations to introduce a wider exclusion zone around airports and ensure the safety of UK airspace?

Stuart Andrew: We take this matter incredibly seriously, and it is important to get things absolutely right because there are all sorts of implications for the aspects of security that we will need to introduce. We are working across Government, and the MOD is providing its advice and expertise to ensure that we get proper legislation in place to make the response effective.

Outsourcing: Quality of Service

3. **Karen Lee** (Lincoln) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the quality of service delivered through contracts outsourced by his Department. [908523]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): The Ministry of Defence regularly monitors the performance of all its contractors, including for outsourced services. That is carried out through the

robust monitoring of contract performance indicators, with action being taken as appropriate when standards are not met.

Karen Lee: Capita, which receives millions of pounds through MOD contracts, has consistently missed its recruitment and savings targets, yet it was handed a £500 million fire and rescue contract last year despite receiving a dire financial risk assessment. Following the Carillion fiasco, will the Minister recognise that this Government's ideological commitment to outsourcing has caused needless precarity for MOD workers in my Lincoln constituency and across the UK?

Stuart Andrew: In the wake of Carillion's collapse, the Prime Minister commissioned a review of outsourcing, with which the MOD has engaged, that seeks to improve the public service outcomes and value for money of Government outsourcing. However, I gently point out to the hon. Lady that outsourcing also happened under the previous Labour Government.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): The Minister will be aware that Members have offered scathing reviews of the Government's no-deal Brexit outsourcing procurement decisions across portfolios. What no-deal outsourcing contracts has the MOD issued? Will the Minister ensure that there is a comprehensive review of procurement processes before he joins the Secretary of State for Transport in thrusting his Department into a Brexit procurement fiasco?

Stuart Andrew: We work closely with all the companies to which we outsource, ensuring that we monitor their work and that they meet the standards that are expected of them. If they do not meet those standards, we will take the necessary action, and we have done so.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): The Defence Fire Safety Regulator's leaked report highlighted a catalogue of failures to manage fire safety in single-living accommodation. It appears that the estates contract that was outsourced to CarillionAmey does not include the inspection and maintenance of fire doors and fire escapes, which is a shocking omission that puts servicemen and women in an unacceptable situation. Will the Minister agree to carry out an immediate review of fire safety across all MOD sites and to implement the report's recommendations in full? Will he also agree to halt the outsourcing of the defence fire and rescue service to Capita, which seems grossly irresponsible in the circumstances?

Stuart Andrew: The Ministry of Defence takes the safety of its people and the findings of the report extremely seriously. We are committed to addressing the shortfalls identified in the report. We have already taken action on some of the recommendations, and we will continue to ensure that we implement the report's other recommendations.

Syria: Coalition Forces

4. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with his US counterpart on the future deployment of coalition forces in Syria. [908524]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): I have regular conversations with the US Secretary of Defence on a range of issues, including Syria. Last week I had my first discussion with the acting Secretary of Defence, and the MOD will continue those discussions with the US Department of Defence.

Mr Carmichael: One of the many risks of the position taken by President Trump, as recently exposed on Twitter, is that it leaves the Kurdish forces and population in Syria vulnerable to attacks by Russia, Turkey and others. The Kurds have been an important part of the coalition of which we have been part. Will the Secretary of State give me some assurance that, whatever America does, we will continue to stand with those who have stood with us?

Gavin Williamson: Our whole country owes a great debt of gratitude to the Syrian Democratic Forces and many of the Kurdish forces that are part of it. I am in continuing discussions with my French and US counterparts to ensure that we do everything we can to continue to support the SDF. The war that they have waged alongside us against Daesh has been vital, and we should not forget the debt of gratitude that we owe them.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): Following Turkish President Erdoğan's refusal to meet US National Security Adviser John Bolton in Ankara last week to discuss the future of the Kurdish YPG forces fighting Daesh in Syria, is the Secretary of State worried that the withdrawal of US forces from Syria will allow Turkey to crush the Kurdish fighters, whom it regards as terrorists? Can the Government offer any further reassurances to the Kurdish forces that they will continue to support their efforts to overcome Daesh in Syria, and will the Government persuade our NATO ally Turkey to refrain from using its military might against the Kurds?

Gavin Williamson: We should recognise the fact that Daesh has been considerably degraded over the last few years and has been deprived of considerable amounts of territory, but we should not be complacent about the threat it continues to pose. We need to work with allies such as the SDF, as well as with Syria's other neighbours, to make sure we continue to put pressure on Daesh and do not give it the space to do us harm in this country. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we also need to be speaking to our partners, including Turkey, to make sure that everyone comes to the table to create a long-lasting peace in Syria that, importantly, includes the Kurds.

Leaving the EU: Defence Co-operation

5. **Hugh Gaffney** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): What plans his Department has for maintaining defence co-operation with European partners in the event of the UK leaving the EU without a deal. [908525]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): The UK is a global player. We will remain engaged in the world and central to European foreign and security policy as we leave the EU. Much of our engagement is managed bilaterally or in other organisations.

Hugh Gaffney: No deal would have a disastrous impact on defence co-operation, and the UK's defence sector relies on pan-European supply chains. Will the Government finally provide some certainty to workers in the wider defence sector by accepting that a permanent customs union with the EU is essential?

Gavin Williamson: As I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware, 90% of our industrial collaboration with other European countries on defence is actually on a bilateral basis, not through the European Union. I imagine that that pattern will go long into the future. When we look at the defence of Europe, is it based on the European Union or on the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation? I would argue it is based on the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, not the European Union.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend take this opportunity, in the light of tomorrow's important votes, to explain his view of the claims made by some observers outside this place that the defence and security clauses of the withdrawal agreement would somehow cede control over defence operations and military procurement from Her Majesty's Government to EU institutions?

Gavin Williamson: I absolutely reassure the House that that is not going to happen. Our sovereign capability and sovereign control over our military and intelligence is something that will always be protected.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): In order to appease the hard right of the Conservative party, the Prime Minister has spent the last two years presenting no deal as a viable option, but no deal would mean that we would have to withdraw from all common security and defence policy missions, with our seconded personnel sent home forthwith. We would be permanently shut out of the European Defence Agency and the defence fund, undermining vital research and industrial co-operation, and our defence industry would be hit by crippling tariffs and delays at the border, putting in jeopardy the equipment that our armed forces need. Given all that, does the Secretary of State agree that a no-deal Brexit would be catastrophic for defence and security?

Gavin Williamson: I do not agree at all. Our country can and will succeed, whatever it has to deal with and whatever it faces. Much of our defence collaboration is done through third-party organisations, whether they be NATO, the United Nations or joint expeditionary forces. As I have already touched upon, most of our defence industrial collaboration is done not through the European Union, but on a bilateral basis.

Nia Griffith: Why can the Secretary of State not just say, absolutely unequivocally, that no deal is not just undesirable but completely unthinkable? Does he agree with the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), who has warned that no deal would be an "irresponsible act of self-harm"? It would be dangerous for Britain. Instead of using a no deal to blackmail MPs into supporting the Prime Minister's unworkable deal, why will the Government not do the responsible thing and rule out no deal once and for all?

Gavin Williamson: Obviously, the hon. Lady will have the opportunity to take part in the debate this afternoon and tomorrow. The Prime Minister has negotiated a deal with the EU that she is putting to this House, and perhaps the hon. Lady will support it. But it is also clear that this country always has and always will succeed, whether we are in the EU or outside it; whether we have a deal or no deal, Britain will succeed and Britain will prosper.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Following the Prime Minister's commitment to participate in aspects of the EU's defence framework, can the Defence Secretary advise as to the carve-outs the UK has negotiated, or intends to negotiate, from strict third country participation criteria in any common security and defence policy initiative?

Gavin Williamson: We have been clear that we will participate in the projects that are of interest and value to the UK, and we will not be dragged along into projects that are of no value and interest to this country.

Illegal Immigration (English Channel)

6. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What steps the Royal Navy is taking to support the Home Office in preventing illegal immigration across the English channel. [908526]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): As the House is aware, HMS Mersey, an offshore patrol vessel—OPV—was deployed on 3 January in support of Border Force activity in the channel. Additionally, our support includes the deployment of up to 20 suitably qualified naval personnel on Border Force cutters to provide additional capacity.

Mr Hollobone: Illegal seaborne immigration in small boats across the English channel is driven by people traffickers. The way to stop people traffickers and the illegal immigration is by returning those rescued at sea to the port from whence they came in France. Is the Royal Navy doing that?

Mark Lancaster: Migration control is, of course, not a responsibility of the Ministry of Defence or the Royal Navy; it is a responsibility of the Home Office, so my hon. Friend's question is probably better directed to the Home Secretary. In this particular case, the Royal Navy is simply supplying support under normal MACA—military aid to the civil authorities—rules.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): The Royal Navy has a proud and glorious history, in respect not just of forming the wooden walls of this country, but being the nobility of Neptune's realm, and it has a proud humanitarian record. But the question related to preventing illegal immigration, so could the Minister tell us what the orders of the day are and what the Royal Navy is doing to prevent people from landing in this country?

Mark Lancaster: As I have tried to explain, migration is a matter for the Home Office. In this case, it has made a request for us to supply a vessel, HMS Mersey, to act as a platform for Border Office officers to operate from.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I do not know how to follow that, but I will try. The Secretary of State has been waxing lyrical about the fleet ready escort being based on England's southern coast to deal with this phantom menace of mass immigration, with no plans for basing OPVs in Scotland, as he admitted to me in parliamentary questions. So will the Minister, on behalf of the Secretary of State, advise the House as to whether they have received any representation from the Scottish Conservative cohort in this House about basing fishery protection vessels anywhere remotely near Scotland?

Mark Lancaster: With respect to the hon. Gentleman, he seems to be confusing a number of different issues. The role of the fleet ready escort is certainly very different from that in which HMS Mersey is currently being engaged, as indeed is fishery protection, which is a matter devolved to the Scottish Government.

Global Navigation Satellite System

7. **Lyn Brown** (West Ham) (Lab): What funding his Department has allocated to the proposed global navigation satellite system. [908528]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): Some £92 million has been allocated from the Treasury EU exit fund to the engineering, development and design phase of a UK global navigation satellite system, which is currently under way. The UK Space Agency is leading the work, with the full support of the Ministry of Defence.

Lyn Brown: And yet the reality is that £1.2 billion of UK investment in the Galileo system may now have been wasted because of this Government's failed negotiation. This Government now want us to spend billions more on a delayed, diplomatically divisive and sketchy system just to cover up for their failure. How much more does the Minister expect the women and men of our armed forces to suffer as a result of lower investment in them because of this Government's botched Brexit negotiations?

Stuart Andrew: Galileo is an issue because our armed forces need to know that we have absolute faith in their secure systems. The EU decided not to allow us to have that information, which is why we are coming out. However, we are working across Government to look into the alternatives, which is why the Prime Minister has put the funding in place.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): What will the proposed UK system provide to our armed forces that the American global positioning system does not?

Stuart Andrew: It will obviously replicate very much what the US system has, but it will also ensure that we have additional capability should we need it. It is really important that our armed forces have all the equipment they need and that they have systems such as GPS so that we can put them in a safe environment when they are defending our country.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): We understand that because of the Government's failure to negotiate our continued involvement in Galileo they are exploring

other options to build their own global satellite navigation system, possibly in co-operation with the United States of America. We know that that will cost the country up to £5 billion, but can the Secretary of State or his Minister tell us how many British companies have lost out on important Galileo contracts as a result of the Government's failure?

Stuart Andrew: We have in this country an exciting space industry that is working incredibly hard and is part of the 18-month engineering, development and design study that is expected to conclude in 2020. I am looking forward to seeing the results of that study, because I am sure that the great British industry that we have will provide us with the system that we need.

Russian Military Activity (NATO Discussions)

8. **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his NATO counterparts on the implications of recent Russian military activity for NATO's strategic priorities. [908529]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): I have regular discussions with my NATO counterparts on Russia. Most recently, the alliance strongly supported the finding of the United States that Russia is in material breach of its obligations under the intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty. NATO has also agreed further steps to bolster its ability to deter and defend against the growing threats we face.

Andrew Bridgen: The UK's participation in NATO's enhanced forward presence is the most visible demonstration of our commitment to the security of our eastern allies. Does my right hon. Friend agree that their security is a vital part of ensuring our own security?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right in his analysis. By investing in defence along the eastern border against the threat of Russia, we are as much investing in our security here in the United Kingdom as we are investing in the security of nations such as Poland, Estonia and Romania. We need to continue to do this, and other nations need to step up to the mark as well.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Recent Russian military activities fall well below the provisions of article 5 of the north Atlantic treaty. Does the Secretary of State share my sadness that the public do not understand articles 1, 2 and 3 of that treaty, which promote peace, security, justice, stability and mutual aid, all of which are vital to our defence capability?

Gavin Williamson: We have to be confident about what NATO can deliver, and we must increasingly make the arguments for what NATO delivers for everyone and explain its full remit. As we look to the future, we are seeing nations such as Russia and, increasingly, China operating in a grey zone, just below the level of conflict. That does not mean that those actions are any less dangerous. In Ukraine, the grey zone has merged with conventional power.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The implications of Russian policy in the near east may be more dramatic now that the US has withdrawn from Syria. Will my

right hon. Friend tell us whether there is a cross-departmental plan on the implications of the new regional dynamic for us and our other partners?

Gavin Williamson: We continue to work right across Government to look at how the changing political situation affects many countries, not only in Europe but, as my hon. Friend said, in the middle east. I assure him that we will continue to look at that issue closely.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Russian incursions into Scottish waters are increasingly blatant, yet still no major naval surface ships are based in Scotland. Has the Secretary of State had any discussions with his NATO counterparts about the UK's responsibility to patrol its north Atlantic maritime territory properly?

Gavin Williamson: What we have seen is increased investment in the North Atlantic, whether that is the deployment of P8s to Lossiemouth or the continued investment in our submarine forces at Her Majesty's Naval Base Clyde, and we will continue to make that investment. We are very much leading the way in dealing with the challenges that increased Russian activity in the North Atlantic presents not just to us but to the whole of NATO.

Leaving the EU: Future Defence Relationship

9. **Gill Furniss** (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the UK's future defence relationship with the EU after the UK leaves the EU. [908530]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): The UK will pursue a distinctive, independent and sovereign foreign and defence policy that meets British interests and promotes our values. The political declaration negotiated with the EU recognises the shared threats and values of the UK and the EU and provides a framework for an ambitious, broad, deep and flexible future relationship.

Gill Furniss: The EU Common Security and Defence Policy missions play an extremely important role for peace and security in the European continent and beyond. Can the Minister confirm that, post-Brexit, we will not be withdrawing personnel and operational support from such missions?

Mark Lancaster: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Of course, up until recently, we actually led Op Atalanta, which was the counter-piracy operation in Somalia, although that has now handed over to a joint mission between Italy and Spain. In the future, the Prime Minister has made it absolutely clear that, just because we are leaving the European Union, it does not mean to say that we are leaving our responsibilities over security in the European Union. We will look at contributing to missions where we can when it is in both the UK and EU's interests.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, as we regain our position as an independent and global presence on the world stage, it is even more important that the United Kingdom is seen as a reliable and credible partner and ally across the world?

Mark Lancaster: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is a golden opportunity for us to look to expand our footprint across the world. Only this year, we have seen Royal Navy warships in the far east—three in fact—and that is just the sort of presence that we look to continue in the future.

Royal Marines Bases

10. **Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): When he plans to announce the long-term arrangements for Royal Marines bases. [908531]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): Before I answer this question, Mr Speaker, may I join you in welcoming our overseas guests here today? They are strong, important and valued Commonwealth allies. In particular, I thank our Australian representative: Sydney hosted the Invictus games in October and did an absolutely fantastic job in reminding all of us that there is life after injury, and that, through sport, people can develop a new chapter as they advance.

On the Royal Marines, I hope, Mr Speaker, that you will join me in congratulating the Royal Marines as they celebrate 355 years since their formation. They have a fantastic history: helping Lord Nelson secure victory at Trafalgar; ensuring that we secured The Rock in 1704; enabling us to land at Normandy with 17,500 Marines; and, of course, helping in the liberation of the Falklands. We all owe those who earned the coveted Green Beret a huge debt of gratitude.

Mr Speaker: That is characteristically gracious of the right hon. Gentleman. I just add that Melbourne is also hosting, over the next fortnight, the Australian Open, one of the great sporting events of the calendar and, for this Chair, now and again, a respite from politics.

Luke Pollard: Since my Adjournment debate on the Royal Marines' basing arrangements last week, I have received lots of feedback from those who have served in the Royal Marines. It is clear that the association between the Royal Marines and Stonehouse is a bond worth preserving. Will the Minister consider extending the closure date of Stonehouse barracks in Plymouth from 2023 to 2025 or later to allow enough time to build the state of the art Royal Marines superbase in the city that our Royal Marines rightly deserve?

Mr Ellwood: I join the hon. Gentleman—I hope the whole House will agree with me—in saying thank you to all those who have served and who are serving in the Royal Marines. He is aware that we had a series of debates last week supporting the Royal Marines and confirming an important continued presence in the south-west. He will be aware that 3 Commando Brigade will remain in the Plymouth area; 29 Commando Royal Artillery must move from the Citadel, which is no longer fit for purpose; 40 Commando will move from Taunton; 42 Commando will remain in Bickleigh; 45 Commando will remain in Condor; and our close protection unit looking after our nuclear assets and Lymington will continue as well.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): The Minister's predecessor assured me that Plymouth would remain the centre of gravity for amphibious operations

in this country. Will the Minister confirm that, whatever happens in this rebasing strategy, Plymouth will remain the centre of gravity for amphibious operations in the United Kingdom?

Mr Ellwood: I can confirm that Plymouth will remain the centre of gravity for the Royal Marines commandos. As I just said, 3 Commando headquarters will remain there. Confirmation of our commitment to the Royal Marines was made this year when the Defence Secretary was able to confirm the continuation of Albion and Bulwark, those stalwart workhorses required for amphibious capability.

UK Airstrikes Against Daesh

11. **Royston Smith** (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of UK airstrikes against Daesh. [908532]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): Royal Air Force airstrikes have played a vital role in the campaign against Daesh. By supporting local troops on the ground in both Iraq and Syria, we have helped them to retake more than 99% of the territory that Daesh once occupied across both countries. This is a significant success, but Daesh still holds pockets of territory. We must continue to fight the terrorist threat that Daesh poses in the middle east and, of course, in the United Kingdom.

Royston Smith: As the Secretary of State has alluded to, it is estimated that 99% of the territory once held by Daesh is now gone. In the light of the coalition's success in helping to degrade Daesh in Syria, what further actions does my right hon. Friend propose when airstrikes are no longer required?

Gavin Williamson: We have seen 51 airstrikes against Daesh in the last month, 27 of which occurred in the last two weeks alone, so the tempo of activity and the amount of resource that the coalition will continue to have to commit will still be substantial over the long term. We will continue to work closely with our allies to see what kind of support package needs to be offered to continue to put pressure on Daesh, whether that is in Iraq or other countries.

Offensive Cyber-capabilities

12. **Matt Warman** (Boston and Skegness) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to develop offensive cyber-capabilities. [908533]

20. **James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to develop offensive cyber-capabilities. [908541]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): The Ministry of Defence is committed to exploiting offensive cyber as a warfighting tool. We are developing and employing capabilities through the national offensive cyber programme, and ensuring that offensive cyber is fully integrated with military full-spectrum operations.

Matt Warman: Working with the private sector and keeping legislation up to date is essential when it comes to developing cyber-capabilities, offensive or otherwise.

What steps is the Department taking to ensure that the private sector is appropriately involved and that legislation is kept up to date?

Mark Lancaster: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I can reassure the House that all our offensive cyber operations comply with the law of armed conflict, and with national and international law. This is very much a 21st century technology, which is why we apply the enterprise approach and work closely with the private sector when it comes to developing this capability.

James Cartlidge: Of course, the private sector is a real success story; there is huge growth in the area. What more can the Government do to work with the private sector—in the context not just of defensive cyber, but of offensive cyber—to ensure that we can bring forward technology that assists not only the country, but UK firms as well?

Mark Lancaster: The short answer is by utilising the skillsets of the private sector. In many ways we have done this by recognising the use of reserves. We cannot always compete with the salaries paid by the private sector, but many of those working in the private sector are committed to national security. That is why this has very much been a growth area when it comes to the use of reserves.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Cyber-security is supposed to be a priority of the modernising defence programme, yet post-Brexit we are going to lose access to the European arrest warrant, Europol and the sharing of data used in EU frameworks. How is the Ministry of Defence going to deal with those challenges?

Mark Lancaster: It is very much within the agreement. Equally, this is a priority, which is precisely why we are investing £1.9 billion in it over coming years.

Capita's Army Recruitment Contract

13. **David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of Capita's Army recruitment contract. [908534]

17. **John Grogan** (Keighley) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of Capita's Army recruitment contract. [908538]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): The Army is working closely with Capita, with multiple interventions now in place and delivering improvements. Regular soldier applications are at a five-year high, supported by last year's award-winning "This is Belonging" marketing campaign. It will take longer to see increases in trained strength due to the length of the recruitment and training pipelines.

David Hanson: This contract has underperformed. How much would it cost to cancel it, and why is the Minister not considering that as a key option?

Mark Lancaster: There are certainly alternative plans in place should this contract not perform, and the Secretary of State has made it absolutely clear that he has not ruled that out. However, I am pleased that in

recent months, after interventions by Capita, we have seen a dramatic improvement in the contract. One of the indications of that is that applications are now at a five-year high.

John Grogan: Capita's complete failure to deliver on its Army recruitment contract is frustrating the ambitions of many youngsters whose only desire is to serve their country. In the light of all this, may I ask the Minister again: can Capita be trusted to run the defence contract, and that of the fire service as well?

Mark Lancaster: We have been quite open about the fact that there have been challenges in this contract. Equally, the Chief of the Defence Staff, in his appearance before the Select Committee the other day, recognised that some of these issues were of the Army's own making historically. I can only repeat again that I am confident—this has occupied much of my time in recent months—that improvements have been made to the contract, and we are now seeing that pipeline working. It is much more effective than it has been in the past, and I think the results will be seen in a few months' time.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I accept that it is early days, but has the Minister made any assessment of the Army's new recruitment advertising campaign?

Mark Lancaster: Yes. The very fact that everybody seems to be talking about it is a very positive sign. Time will tell, but early indications are that applications are up by over 20% on this time last year and by 35% on 2017, so that appears to be positive.

Armed Forces Personnel: Trends

14. **Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab):** What recent assessment he has made of trends in the number of armed forces personnel. [908535]

16. **Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab):** What recent assessment he has made of trends in the number of armed forces personnel. [908537]

23. **Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab):** What recent assessment he has made of trends in the number of armed forces personnel. [908545]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): We remain committed to maintaining the overall size of the armed forces, and we have a range of measures under way to improve recruitment and retention. The challenge is kept under constant review.

Alex Cunningham: Surely the Secretary of State recognises the need for a serious recruitment programme for the armed forces rather than this targeting of gamers, whose screen skills could, I suppose, be redeployed in bombarding the Spanish navy with paintballs.

Mark Lancaster: I am grateful, but I am not the Secretary of State.

Alex Cunningham: Not yet!

Mark Lancaster: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his confidence in me. With respect, he is rather missing the point of the latest recruitment campaign. We will always have core intenders who want to join the military, but equally we are trying to attract a whole group of people who do not realise that the modern military requires many skills other than the ability to use a bayonet. That is precisely why, when it comes to looking at peacekeeping operations, we need to use the compassion of the so-called snowflakes who can sit there and be effective operators in the humanitarian environment.

Mr Speaker: In calling the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith), I take this opportunity to wish him a very happy birthday—might I suggest the 49th?

Nick Smith: Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is very kind of you to give me your best wishes.

Does the Minister not accept that the number of fully trained personnel in each of the armed services is now lower than it was this time last year, making a mockery of the Conservatives' manifesto pledge to maintain the overall size of the armed forces?

Mark Lancaster: The overall manning of the armed forces remains at 93%. Crucially, that means that we are maintaining all of our operational commitments.

Peter Kyle: As part of the future accommodation model, service personnel are being forced off-patch. This could increase the loneliness among service personnel that has been identified by the Royal British Legion. Has the Minister made an assessment of the implications for people and for the attractiveness of coming into the forces that that will induce?

Mark Lancaster: Let us be absolutely clear. The future accommodation model is about choice. It is about recognising that not everybody necessarily wants to live on the patch, and about creating a more stable armed forces. For example, creating super-garrisons means that families are not being moved around the country the whole time. The aim is to create a good retention tool and, crucially, to give our service personnel choice in how they live their lives.

Modernising the Defence Estate

15. **Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab):** What recent representations he has received on the modernising the defence estate programme. [908536]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the better defence estate programme is a 25-year programme to rationalise the defence estate, which is far too large for our present circumstances. We need to look at our training areas and our garrisons, and we need to provide places for civilian housing too. He will be aware that Chester is involved in that programme.

Christian Matheson: Does the Minister share my concern that reducing the number of barracks and concentrating them in one place—for example, in the north-west, at Weeton in Preston—reduces the operational footprint of the Army in the north-west or elsewhere in

the country and therefore reduces operational effectiveness? Might it not be better to keep open some barracks, such as the Dale barracks in Chester, to maintain a better operational spread?

Mr Ellwood: It is interesting that the hon. Gentleman raises our footprint in the north-west of England, which is a very large recruitment area, because the Defence Secretary was talking about that this morning. The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the decisions that have been made concerning the Dale barracks. The 2nd Battalion Mercian Regiment and the Royal Logistic Corps units will be moving. The Fox barracks will remain, and the Army Reserve will be there, but his point is well made, and we will try to act upon it.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Millions of pounds have been invested in the Norton Manor site, where 40 Commando is based, in Taunton Deane. It is ideally located for the marines, and more than 150 people aside from the marines work on the extensive site. This place has a great deal to recommend it, so will my right hon. Friend give a commitment that all those aspects will be assessed in the overall plan to rationalise the defence estate?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend makes a powerful case for the Taunton barracks and 40 Commando. She is aware that the decision has been made already, but perhaps we can meet separately to see what more can be done to provide support.

Mr Speaker: As befits a former teacher of more than 30 years' standing, the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker) has been most patiently and courteously waiting for her opportunity.

Armed Forces: Morale

18. **Thelma Walker** (Colne Valley) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the level of morale in the armed forces. [908539]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): The hon. Lady is right to raise concerns about morale in our armed forces. The continuous attitude survey is critical for us to understand the views of our armed forces personnel. We often talk about training, exercises and operations, but the welfare of our personnel and their families is critical.

Thelma Walker: I thank the Minister for his response. A recent survey of armed forces personnel found that only two in five are satisfied with service life in general. That has been linked to low pay and poor-quality accommodation. What are the Government doing specifically to reverse the decline in our armed forces' morale?

Mr Ellwood: As I mentioned in my opening remarks, that is a concern, and we must address it. Pay has never been an issue in the armed forces. When I joined up, it was not an issue. People do not join the armed forces for the money, but we do not want it to become an issue. I was pleased that the pay freeze was lifted last year, with a 2% rise. Effort is also being made to improve accommodation and provide flexible working, which is

the main ingredient that forces people to depart, because they are unable to spend enough time with their families. Those changes have been introduced, and I hope they will affect the morale of our armed forces.

Topical Questions

T1. [908546] **Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): As we start the new year, I want to pay tribute to the men and women who spent Christmas away from home in service of their country. Over the Christmas period, I visited UK armed forces personnel in Ukraine, South Sudan and Kenya. It was excellent to see the work they are doing in the security, peacekeeping and humanitarian fields.

Mike Wood: What action is the Ministry of Defence taking to support the democratic Government in Ukraine? Will the Secretary of State update us on his recent trip to Odessa, and particularly the position of Ukrainian navy sailors held prisoner by Russia?

Gavin Williamson: What we are seeing in Ukraine is the most dreadful of situations, where Russia's aggressive acts include Ukrainian sailors being held against their will, and they continue to be held against their will. As an act to demonstrate their intent for 2019, Russia and the Kremlin should be looking at letting these men return to their families and friends at the earliest possible opportunity. We are supporting the Ukrainian people. We have already seen HMS Echo visiting Odessa, and the Royal Marines will start training with Ukrainian forces in the very early part of this year.

T4. [908549] **Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Secretary of State want to apologise to Scots Guardsman Stephen McWhirter, who was called a snowflake in Capita's disastrous £752 million recruitment campaign, without his permission? Guardsman McWhirter has received torrents of mocking messages, and he has said on Facebook that he will resign from the Guards.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): I am afraid what the hon. Gentleman says is simply untrue. The Guardsman concerned gave his specific permission for his photograph to be used on that poster and understood exactly the content of the campaign.

T2. [908547] **Matt Warman** (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Sexual violence against women has been an appalling part of the violence we have seen in South Sudan. Will the Secretary of State say a little bit more about what British troops have contributed as our part of the UN operations there?

Gavin Williamson: I have had the great privilege of seeing our service personnel who are part of the UN mission, and the work that they are doing in combating sexual violence in South Sudan is something we can all feel rightly proud of. We have seen them take action to deal with some of the threats that many women and children are facing every day, but we have to look at how we can do more. Earlier last year, we saw the opening of a new training programme at Shrivenham, and we need to look at how we can step up that work.

T7. [908553] **Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): Tomorrow afternoon, the funeral takes place of Acting Corporal Iain Dodds, formerly of the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. His family are obviously grieving. He died, very tragically, before Christmas, at the age of 39, following years of adjusting having left the service after serving in both Iraq and Afghanistan. May I put on the record my thanks to the Minister for the Armed Forces for helping the family with the funeral arrangements?

Mark Lancaster: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his acknowledgment. In cases like this, it is absolutely right that collectively across the House we should act in the way we have. I am delighted that we have managed to put things in place to help the family.

T3. [908548] **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What measures have the Ministry of Defence taken to ensure that serving and former members of the armed forces suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder or other mental health issues are given priority when it comes to the provision of social housing?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I am pleased to say that the majority of people make the transition into civilian life without a problem, but there are those who require our support, and we have provided a new programme through the mental health and wellbeing strategy to emphasise this approach. We are also focusing on the veterans strategy, which will provide for a consultation on what more we can do to support those affected by PTSD.

T8. [908554] **Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Further to that question, Durham County Council has just won a gold award for setting up an excellent outreach programme for veterans, including guaranteeing job interviews. Will the Minister consider making that mandatory across the entire country?

Mr Ellwood: First, I commend the programme. Before I go down that road, I would encourage more of a voluntary approach; I do not like mandating such things. I would be happy to visit the programme, which might be a starting point.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I call Ranil Jayawardena. Where is the chappie? What a pity. Very well—I call Nigel Huddleston.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm when the final clean-up in Salisbury will take place, and what further training can be provided to the armed forces to prepare them for such attacks?

Gavin Williamson: We expect the final clean-up to be completed by March. I pay tribute to all the service personnel across all three services who have done so much in dealing with the attack. Additionally, we will be training Royal Marines to be those best able to deal with the challenges of nerve agents, to make sure we deepen our resilience against future threats.

T9. [908555] **Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The security review of 2015 identified cyber-attack, terrorism and climate change as among the greatest threats to the UK. As none of those are dealt with by replacing Trident, whose price-tag is soaring and which still has safety concerns, is it not time to change direction and invest in real cyber-security?

Gavin Williamson: We have to recognise the need to invest in a whole spectrum of different capabilities, whether that is nuclear deterrence, conventional forces or cyber-security and offensive cyber.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The medal campaign group for Bomber Command has identified that it is the only main campaign not to be recognised by the Air Crew Europe Star. Will my right hon. Friend do all he can to ensure that the committee responsible considers its submission to address that issue?

Mark Lancaster: I am very sympathetic to those calls. However, the award of the clasp rather than the medal for the aircrew who served with Bomber Command is consistent with the policy for other awards in recognition of service during world war two, which simply dictated that campaign medals would reflect involvement in broad theatres of war. Exactly the same policy applied to Fighter Command, who received a clasp for their service during the battle of Britain.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Further to that question, my constituent, Wing Commander Jim Wright, is a 95-year-old veteran who has campaigned long and hard for those changes to be made in respect of Bomber Command. I hear what the Minister is saying, but we owe these gentlemen a debt for their heroic acts. Given that time is marching on, surely they should be recognised in the way that they deserve?

Mark Lancaster: As I say, I am sympathetic, but the aircrew have been recognised, through the award of the clasp to the medal. We are just being consistent in how the policy has been applied over many years.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Redevelopment of the REEMA sites in Carterton is an urgent priority for west Oxfordshire, not only for RAF personnel who depend on the housing, but because of its effect on west Oxfordshire's housing stock. Will the Minister meet me again to discuss how we can progress this urgent matter?

Mr Ellwood: I would be delighted.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee), may I press the Minister on recruitment? MOD figures reveal that in the first quarter of last year, Capita failed to bring in 90% of the recruits that the British Army needs. When I wrote to the Minister about this issue, he simply referenced old data. When will the Government recognise the crisis of failed privatisation and bring recruitment back in-house?

Mark Lancaster: The reality is that there is a delay between people applying to join the Army and coming through the pipeline as trained soldiers. What I am

trying to explain to the House is that, as a result of the recent recruitment campaign, applications to the armed forces, in particular the Army, are up significantly—indeed, they are at a five-year high. In time, that will work its way through into actual numbers serving in the Army.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The Russian annexation of Crimea has been followed by the construction of the Kerch bridge to the Russian mainland. To date, no NATO ship has entered under the bridge into the sea of Azov. When does the Ministry of Defence expect that situation to change?

Gavin Williamson: We can be very proud that the Royal Navy was the first navy to enter the Black sea and go to Odessa in solidarity with our Ukrainian friends. Currently we have no plans, but we will continue to keep this situation under review; and we plan to make sure that further Royal Navy vessels visit the Black sea later this year.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): What progress is the Minister making with the Home Office to help those Afghan interpreters who came here under the Government's scheme but are now finding huge difficulties in being reunited with their families because normal immigration rules apply? They deserve our support.

Mark Lancaster: We review the policy constantly, and I will update the House in due course.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What discussions has the Defence Secretary had with the Secretary of State for Health about identifying and resourcing the health needs of veterans in the NHS 10-year plan, which was published last week?

Gavin Williamson: We have regular discussions with the Department of Health. We recognise that properly supporting veterans is not something that the Ministry

of Defence can do on its own; something has to be done right across Government. That is why the creation of a veterans board, working across Government and bringing the Department of Health together with other Departments, is vital. As part of the veterans board, the Department of Health for England, as well as the devolved nations, is working on how we can enhance the support that we give to veterans.

Mr Speaker: Order. I point out, as much for the benefit of our visitors as for right hon. and hon. Members, that the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) not merely represents Bridgend and is a member of the Defence Committee, but is President of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly and we are very proud of that.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Civilian authorities and agencies are now often on the frontline in dealing with cyber-attacks, chemical weapons attacks and drone incursions. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the Ministry of Defence is stepping up training and resilience capability of our civilian agencies to ensure that the skills transfers are there, so that they too are able to defend our country?

Gavin Williamson: Yes; of course we always have that backstop of being able to step in and support civilian authorities as well. Increasingly, as we touched on earlier, there is a growing grey zone where people who wish to do us harm are acting, and we need to consider how we support civilian authorities more in future to help them best deal with those threats.

Mr Speaker: Again, in the name of the intelligibility of our proceedings to those visiting, I point out that we are about to have a point of order—not just any old point of order, but a point of order from the Mother of the House, the female Member with the longest uninterrupted service, since 28 October 1982, if my research is correct or my recollection accurate.

Points of Order

3.36 pm

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Thank you for agreeing to hear it. The House will obviously be fully aware that we have a very important vote tomorrow in which all hon. Members will want to take part. My hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) is nine months pregnant and due to have a caesarean tomorrow. She should not have to choose between going through the Division Lobby in a wheelchair while nine months pregnant, having postponed her caesarean, and losing her right to vote. If the Whips were to agree, and with the agreement of the Leader of the House, would it be possible, Mr Speaker, for you to facilitate a proxy vote so that she can have her baby and have her vote? The House agreed to this change in principle in February last year. In the circumstances of tomorrow's important vote and my hon. Friend's pregnancy, would it be possible for that to be arranged?

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab)
rose—

Mr Speaker: Very well, I will come to the hon. Lady now.

Emma Reynolds: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Can you advise me on how to expedite the process of introducing proxy votes? How many babies do we in this House, collectively, have to have before we see any change? I will probably be on my second before we have a policy to introduce proxy votes. There should be some urgency in implementing this reform of the House.

Mr Speaker: Let me respond to the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds). In the first instance, I think it worthwhile to be candid in saying that I am advised—of course I seek advice and must then hear what the advice is—that it is not within the gift of party authorities, although I would argue that they are in a sense House authorities, to facilitate proxy voting for tomorrow. I respect that view, although in all candour I am not sure that I agree with it, but it is tendered to me in good faith and I put it out there for the House to know.

I believe it is absolutely essential, not just for the rights of the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) but for the reputation of this House as an institution approaching, or starting to take an interest in, the modern world, that she should be facilitated to vote tomorrow. The notion that she should have to be wheeled through a Division Lobby would, I think, be regarded by very large numbers of people as completely uncivilised. That should not have to happen.

It has been suggested to me that—in a departure from, or at any rate an extension of, the normal nodding-through arrangement, which ordinarily applies to somebody who is indisposed but on the parliamentary estate—the hon. Lady could be nodded through and her vote counted even if she were, in fact, in a hospital bed at the time. I do not rule out that possibility and for my part I

would be happy, on my own shoulders, to agree to that. Personally, I think it preferable that the hon. Lady should have a proxy vote, but that seems to me to depend on cross-party agreement. I have been approached about the matter by the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on women in Parliament, the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), who wrote to me very recently. It is good to see her in her place—forgive me, but I had not seen her. If she wants to come in on this exchange, she very properly can, or not if she does not wish to do so. I wrote back to her making it explicitly clear that I have made clear from this Chair my support for, and willingness to assist in the introduction of, proxy voting for the purposes of baby leave. I have done that several times.

It is important for the House to know, and for those attending our proceedings to be told, the facts of the matter. The issue has been debated twice in the Chamber. The first was on 1 February last year in a debate under the auspices of the Backbench Business Committee. If memory serves, that debate was secured at the instigation of the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham. On that occasion, the proposition that proxy voting for baby leave should be introduced was passed, if I am right, *nem con*—that is to say, without opposition. Subsequently, there was a general debate in this Chamber on 13 September last year in Government time. There was no Division of the House, so there is no recorded vote, but my recollection is that there was strong support for the change on that occasion. The Leader of the House, who I think was present at the time, indicated her desire to expedite progress on the matter. From my own contacts, I understand it to have been very much her wish to bring about change before the end of last year.

If I may say so, and I will, it is extremely regrettable that almost a year after the first debate, and more than four months after the second debate, the change has not been made. Frankly, that is lamentable—lamentable—and very disadvantageous and injurious to the reputation of this House. If an agreement can be reached between the usual channels today—I am chairing in the Chamber, so Members will need to come and tell me what has been agreed—I am very happy to facilitate a change for tomorrow, preferably in the form of a proxy vote for the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn, but at the very least something to ensure that she can be nodded through.

It really is time, in pursuit of the expressed view of this House, that reactionary forces are overcome. If people want to express their opposition, let them not do so murkily behind the scenes; let them have the character to say up front that they oppose progressive change. I hope we can get progressive change. What better opportunity to do so than before our historic vote tomorrow? I hope I have made my own views clear.

That partly deals with that. I am now in the hands—I say this for the benefit of our observers—of a very formidable band of colleagues. They will help make it happen.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. While I utterly support the idea of proxy voting for women such as our colleague the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), we have people who are absent from the

Chamber and from Parliament with a varying range of illnesses, or who have partners or family members who are terminally ill. The issue needs to be dealt with across the range.

Mr Speaker: That may very well be so, and I am not unsympathetic to the hon. Lady's proposition, but I was speaking pretty much off the top of my head, and what I did not say but should have said, because it is part of the pattern and the picture, is that the Procedure Committee was invited to consider this matter. I gave evidence to it, as I know other Members did, and the Procedure Committee specifically endorsed the idea and was looking for a resolution to be put to the House. Ordinarily, such a resolution would be put to the House by the Leader of the House. I very much regret that that has not happened, but pragmatically I am seeking, on the back of discussions with the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham, to broker progress not next month or next year, or at some unspecified point in the distant future, but with effect from tomorrow. The wider issue of other categories can and should of course be properly considered by the House of Commons.

Universal Credit

3.45 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): On 6 January, it was reported in *The Observer* that the Government had—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady is always ahead of herself. What she does at this stage is say, "To ask the Minister to make a statement on universal credit". We will get her full blast in a moment.

Margaret Greenwood (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Minister to make a statement on universal credit.

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): As I outlined in the written statement tabled last Friday in the House, we have decided to replace the regulations relating to managed migration previously laid before the House with two new sets of regulations.

These regulations will allow a series of measures relating to universal credit to be put in place. The Government will seek powers in an affirmative set of regulations for a pilot of managed migration so that the Department cannot issue any more migration notices once 10,000 people have been awarded through the process. Those regulations will also deliver on our commitment to provide transitional protection for those managed migrated to universal credit. Separate regulations will put in place a severe disability premium gateway, allowing recipients of this benefit to continue to claim existing benefits until they are managed migrated on to universal credit.

In addition, my statement reported that we were bringing forward the necessary legislation to remove the planned extension of the policy to provide support for a maximum of two children in universal credit. This overall policy ensures that parents receiving benefits face the same financial decisions about the size of their family as those supporting themselves solely through work. We decided, however, that it would not be right to apply the policy to children born before it came into law on 6 April 2017, so we have cancelled that extension.

The benefits freeze up to April 2020 was voted for by Parliament as part of the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016. As a general point, any changes relating to benefits uprating will be brought before Parliament in the usual way.

Margaret Greenwood: On 6 January, it was reported in *The Observer* that the Government had decided to ask for powers from Parliament for a pilot of the managed migration of 10,000 people from legacy benefits to universal credit, rather than for a pilot of managed migration as a whole. However, on 7 January at oral questions, and the following day in response to an urgent question, Ministers failed to provide clarification of the Government's plans. Then on Thursday, the Secretary of State told Sky News that she did not expect the social security freeze to be renewed when it came to an end in April 2020.

On Friday 11 January, the Secretary of State made a wide-ranging speech on social security, setting out her intentions in relation to managed migration, private sector rents, childcare costs and the two-child limit, but she did not make it in this House or give Members the

[Margaret Greenwood]

opportunity to ask questions about those really important matters. On the same day, the High Court found in favour of four single mothers who had brought a legal challenge against the Government on the grounds that universal credit failed to take into account their fluctuating incomes after they were paid twice in a month because their paydays fell very near the end of the month.

How do the Government intend to respond to the High Court judgement? Does the Minister think that the two-child limit is fair to the children affected, and will the Government not scrap it altogether? Will they address the key concern with managed migration, which is that nobody's claim for benefits that they are currently receiving must be ended until they have made a successful new claim for universal credit?

Will the Government make sure that the levels set for payments to people in receipt of severe disability premium who have already transferred to universal credit reflect the financial loss they have suffered? Will they take immediate action to ensure that no one has to wait five weeks to receive their initial payment of universal credit? Why are they not cancelling the benefits freeze now rather than waiting until April 2020, given that the Secretary of State says she believes that the reasons for it being introduced no longer apply? Finally, will the Government call a halt to the roll-out of universal credit?

Alok Sharma: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. Very many people outside the House—many stakeholders—have welcomed the statements made in the House on Friday and what the Secretary of State said in her speech. I am sorry that the hon. Lady did not welcome the positive changes that have been made and are being proposed.

The hon. Lady talked about a number of issues, and I shall go through them. She mentioned the legal judgment on Friday; as she acknowledged, that judgment came out literally a few days ago. As a Department, we will consider it very carefully and then respond. On the two-child policy, we have of course made that change; as she will be aware, the regulations were laid on Friday. She talked about the overall two-child policy, and we do believe that the overall policy is fair. Ultimately, those receiving support in the welfare system should face the same sort of choices as those who support themselves solely through work. It is worth pointing out that if a family who supported themselves solely through work decided to have another child, they would not automatically expect their wages to go up. This is about sustainability.

The hon. Lady mentioned the pilot. We have made it clear that that will start in July 2019, and we are working with a wide range of stakeholders on it. She talked about the severe disability premium: those regulations have been laid. She also mentioned the benefits freeze. May I ask her to reflect on the reason why we had to make various policy choices in the past? It was the awful financial mess left us by the last Labour Government. [Interruption.] I am sorry, but she cannot get away from that point.

I have one final thing to say to the hon. Lady. She talks about changes to the five-week period. I have said this in the House before: if she is so keen on supporting claimants, particularly the vulnerable, as we on the

Government Benches are, why did she not vote for the £1.5 billion of support that came in under Budget 2017 and the £4.5 billion of support announced in the 2018 Budget?

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. On account of the fact that a prime ministerial statement is to follow and that we then have eight hours of protected time for the debate on the withdrawal agreement, I will seek to conclude these exchanges by 4.15 pm. I am sure that colleagues will want to factor that into their calculations.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister and his Secretary of State on the progress that they are making on eliminating some of the obvious defects that have emerged in this otherwise highly desirable policy. Does he agree that the problem is that the details were designed by people who were well intentioned but too paternalistic in their attempts to introduce people to the disciplines and normal way of life of people in work? They were often dealing with people who were vulnerable and relying day to day on cash.

When it is affordable, after we have really recovered from the consequences of the financial disaster, will my hon. Friend address the five-week delay in the first payment, which does cause hardship and which I hope will be gone by the time the so-called migration comes to my constituency?

Alok Sharma: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his support for the policies that we have announced. On the five-week period, we have ensured that people can get support through 100% advances from day one if they require it; two weeks of housing benefit run-on is also available. As part of the package that we announced in the Budget, additional run-on support will be available from 2020.

My right hon. and learned Friend is right: we need to make sure that throughout this process we support the most vulnerable, and that is exactly what the changes that have been announced have been all about.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): First, I want to say how inappropriate it is for the Secretary of State to have made this statement on Friday outside the House and then not even to have bothered to come here today to speak for herself.

We in the Scottish National party welcome this U-turn from the Secretary of State, which vindicates what we, along with a range of charities, women's organisations and faith groups, have been saying since the July Budget in 2015. However, none of us will be fully satisfied as long as the two-child limit applies to births after 6 April 2017: it must be scrapped now. The Secretary of State has already accepted the fundamental unfairness of the two-child limit, so why does the Minister feel that this policy, with its cruel and pernicious rape clause, must continue, even though it has been ruled unfair for other people? Does he not see that it creates a two-tier system in universal credit depending on when children were born? We cannot plan for everything in our lives.

Has the Secretary of State heard the evidence from Turn2us and the Child Poverty Action Group that the two-child policy is forcing women into terminating

healthy pregnancies? Has she heard about the discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities? Does she know that most people claiming this benefit are actually in work, and does she know that in its first year of operation it affected 73,530 people? Where does the 15,000 figure come from?

Friday's court ruling laid bare flaws in universal credit which many Members have been highlighting in relation to the timings of payments. High Court judges said that the DWP had wrongly interpreted the relevant regulations and, shamefully, had tried to justify that on cost grounds. What steps will the Secretary of State take to put that right, and will she stop wasting money in the courts rather than ensuring that our constituents receive what they are fully entitled to?

In its final year alone, the benefit freeze will cut £4.7 billion from the welfare budget, more than the amount that the Chancellor pledged for the work allowance for the next four years. Will the Secretary of State make the case to the Chancellor for scrapping the freeze, which is making life so hard for so many of our constituents?

Alok Sharma: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for welcoming the changes that have been announced. She has referred to the Secretary of State. As the hon. Lady will know, the statement about the changes was made in my name, and the regulations were laid in my name. It is therefore entirely appropriate that I should come here and, quite rightly, answer questions asked by colleagues.

The hon. Lady talked about the non-consensual conception clause. Of course I agree with her that women who find themselves in such utterly awful circumstances must be given the help that they need, and that that must be done in the most compassionate way possible. We have discussed the point before, and she knows that it is purely a question of whether the circumstances that are described are consistent with those of someone who has met the criteria for the exception. The individuals who are dealing with this are third-party professionals who already have experience of supporting vulnerable women.

As I have said, we will consider Friday's court judgment and respond to it.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I welcome the emphasis on helping people into work, and the idea that the implementation of the policy should be compassionate. With that in mind, may I ask whether there will be changes in the timing of benefit so that those who are most in need of it receive it earlier, and whether there will be a review of the housing element, which has sometimes caused trouble as well?

Alok Sharma: My right hon. Friend is, of course, right: throughout this process, we must provide support for the vulnerable in particular. As he will know, once universal credit is fully rolled out, there will be over £2 billion more in the welfare system than there is under the current legacy benefits. One of the changes made in the Budget was the uplifting of work allowances, which will help young parents and also the disabled.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Any improvements in this hideous programme are welcome, but there will still be thousands of universal credit claimants who are moved on to it this year as a

result of natural migration, with no transitional protections. How many people will be pushed into poverty by that move and the Government's lack of compassion in failing to unfreeze the benefits system?

Alok Sharma: As I have said previously in the House and as I said earlier this afternoon, we have put more money into the system to support the most vulnerable, which is absolutely right. As for the pilot phase, we will of course work very carefully with stakeholders to make sure that we get it right.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I warmly welcome this excellent move by the Department. Will my hon. Friend please pay tribute to the sympathetic, careful, diligent and effective manner in which the staff of the Jobcentre Plus in Haywards Heath carry out their difficult duties?

Alok Sharma: My right hon. Friend has highlighted a very important point. He has talked of the incredibly hard-working DWP staff in the Haywards Heath jobcentre, but the Secretary of State and I see the same hard work as we go up and down the country talking to our colleagues in jobcentres. They are all incredibly committed, and they see the benefits of universal credit in helping people and ensuring that claimants have the one-to-one support that was not in place before.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I also welcome these modest steps in the right direction, but why did the Secretary of State and the Minister both deny a week ago the change that the Minister has now announced about the separate regulations for the 10,000 migration? Will the Minister respond to the point made by the Father of the House, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke)? The five-week delay is indefensible; it is forcing people to rely on advances, putting them into debt right at the start of their claim.

Alok Sharma: I know that we have had this exchange before, and I am sorry if the right hon. Gentleman feels that I repeat myself. Of course it is important that we get money in people's pockets early. There is no question about that, and that is why we made the changes when we said we would make sure that absolutely anyone who needed it could get up to 100% of their advances up front. I have talked about the two-week run-on for those on housing benefit, which does not have to be repaid, and as the right hon. Gentleman knows in the last Budget we also announced that from July 2020 those on out-of-work DWP benefits will also get a two-week run-on.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): The manager of the Jobcentre Plus in Redditch said that this is the best system she has seen in 30 years; she has been on the frontline. Does the Minister welcome the fact that today the Resolution Foundation has pointed out that it is those on the lowest end of the income spectrum who are getting back into work, so this is a truly progressive benefit? It is great to see these reforms.

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend highlights an important point. I was at the launch of the Resolution Foundation report this morning, which highlighted precisely the point she has raised. I encourage all colleagues on both

[Alok Sharma]

the Government and Opposition sides to go to their jobcentres and talk—[*Interruption.*] No, if they would talk directly to the people responsible for providing that advice, I think they would find that the system is working.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The Minister should not patronise the Opposition by pretending that somehow we do not all do our constituency duty and we have not been to visit our local jobcentres. I can assure him that we have, and the problem with this benefit is that it was introduced to save money. Large cuts in welfare systems and payments were made. The Minister has put a little bit back, which has got to be welcome, but he has not put back what was taken away, and what was taken away is leaving my constituents relying on food banks with not enough to eat. He needs to recognise that reality.

Alok Sharma: May I suggest that if the hon. Lady has time she and I should talk directly to colleagues in the jobcentre in her area? Let us have a discussion with them and see how we can support her constituents even better.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Surely everybody in this place will want to help people on benefits but ultimately transfer them so that they have the opportunity to work and then pay more into the essential public services that they, and indeed we all, need to get by. Given that we have record employment and also record low unemployment, surely this policy must be doing something right to those ends.

Alok Sharma: The policies we have put in place since 2010 are working; we can see that in the jobs figures. When we came to power in 2010, some 1.4 million people in the country had been on out-of-work benefits for at least nine of the previous 10 years; that is not a legacy that the Opposition should be proud of.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Yes, universal credit does help Jobcentre Plus workers who are trying to persuade people to go into short-hour jobs and zero-hours contracts where their hours of work fluctuate. We welcome the very small changes to this that will help a few thousand people, but what will the Government be doing to help the thousands on universal credit who were paid a few days early over the Christmas period, then received absolutely nothing for their December-January payment of universal credit and are now suffering arrears of rent and childcare payments because of that which the High Court has just ruled against?

Alok Sharma: We will of course respond on the High Court ruling. I am pleased the hon. Lady raised the point about what sort of jobs have been created: just to put it on the record—these are not Government figures; they are from the Office for National Statistics—since 2010 some 75% of all the jobs created are full time, are in high-level occupations and are permanent. That is something I wish Opposition colleagues would acknowledge.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I commend the Minister for these announcements, especially the one on the two-child limit. He appears to have accepted the recommendations of the Select Committee within hours

of its making them. On that theme, if he is looking for ideas, perhaps he missed some of the previous recommendations. For example, in the managed migration that he is now trialling, will he look at moving people on existing benefits over, rather than asking them to make a new claim? That would be a far more effective system, and far better for the claimants.

Alok Sharma: I am pleased that my hon. Friend feels that we were able to react in a matter of hours to the recommendations of the Select Committee. I think he is talking about a process of pre-population, and we will of course work throughout the pilot phase. We have responded to the Social Security Advisory Committee with some of the plans that we have. I would point out, however, that when we had the move to employment and support allowance, we underpaid people as a result of having incomplete information.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's commitment to reopening the Wallasey jobcentre in order to meet the commitment that he has just made to my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle). It is five years since the Government began to impose universal credit. Does not this latest change underline the fact that it has failed in its three aims? It is overdue, over budget and overly complex. Should not all the roll-out be halted until all the fundamental flaws are fixed?

Alok Sharma: Universal credit has now rolled out across the country, as the hon. Gentleman will be aware, and we will of course continue to proceed with it. He is right to say that we need to get this right for everyone, and that is precisely what the changes are about. Universal credit does work for the vast majority of the people who claim it, but it is absolutely right that we provide support, particularly for the most vulnerable.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Can the Minister confirm that the spending on universal credit when it is fully rolled out will be some £2 billion a year more than on the existing legacy benefits, and that this could be worth an average of up to £300 per universal credit family?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is right to say that there will be more money in the system. I should point out that, under the legacy benefits system, there is £2.4 billion of unclaimed benefits. That will change under universal credit, supporting an estimated 700,000 households who will get paid their full entitlement.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Many Opposition Members take representations from trade unions. They are the voice of the DWP workforce, but it often falls on deaf ears in the Government. Is not the reality that the final year of the benefit freeze absolutely undermines any changes that Ministers are trying to make to the benefit system? Will he tell us what representations he and his Department are making to the Treasury to scrap the final year of the benefit freeze?

Alok Sharma: I am not going to apologise for repeating that the reason we made so many difficult decisions when we first came into office and in subsequent years was the record deficit left by Labour—[*Interruption.*]

There is no getting away from that. I have already made it clear that when it comes to issues around uprating, these will be announced in the appropriate way to Parliament.

Mr Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley) (Lab): You gave billions to the banks.

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Campbell, it is very early in the week. I cannot put this down to the effects of hot curry, because I doubt that you have consumed any thus far. There are several days to go, and you need to remain calm. You are a very great figure in the House, and I am concerned for your wellbeing.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): We have been warning Ministers about this problem of the dates for months, so will the Minister now rule out—what is the word? [*Interruption.*] No! Will he rule out appealing against the court decision?

Alok Sharma: Let me repeat this once more. The judgment to which the hon. Lady refers came out on Friday and we are going to have to consider it carefully. We will respond in due course.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I applaud the Government for listening and for making essential changes based on evidence brought forward by those on both sides of the Chamber of the House of Commons. Can the Minister assure me that if further evidence comes to light requiring further changes, the Government will continue to listen and make changes as necessary?

Alok Sharma: I hope we have shown over the past couple of years that we do listen and that we do make changes. Of course we will continue to do so where that is appropriate.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Sometimes it can be hard to understand what the Minister is really saying to us. Most people call non-consensual conception rape, and that is what we are talking about. Most people in this country would call picking and choosing between the children we choose to support discrimination. The next time they Minister has to come to the House, as he undoubtedly will, to tell us about a policy change in relation to the two-child policy, will he commit to telling us exactly what the characteristics are of the kids that our Government will no longer support?

Alok Sharma: I am sorry that the hon. Lady feels unable to welcome the changes. The previous two Budgets have included additional support and, as I just said in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), we will see what more we can do where that is appropriate.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Universal credit was rolled out in my constituency almost two years ago. The roll-out was largely successful, but there are issues, particularly with payment frequency. Will my hon. Friend commit to continue to listen, learn and make adaptations where necessary?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend makes an important point, because several of the other issues announced by the Secretary of State relate to looking at more frequent direct payments to private landlords and at alternative payment arrangements, including offering them proactively.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): I welcome the fact that the Minister will disapply the policy for 15,000 children and families, but will he confirm whether he will still take more than £2,500 from 640,000 families? What is fair or compassionate about that?

Alok Sharma: The hon. Gentleman is right that the policy will support 15,000 families, but we anticipate that 77,000 families and 113,000 children will benefit over a five-year period. It is important that we provide support, but ultimately, as he will know, the overall policy was tested in the courts and was found to be sound.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Universal credit is now being rolled out in my constituency and across Edinburgh, and I have been meeting those who specialise in advising my constituents on the problems that they encounter in the benefits system. The Community Help and Advice Initiative wants to know why the Government are not halting the roll-out until all universal credit's flaws are properly addressed.

Alok Sharma: I think the hon. and learned Lady will find that universal credit has already rolled out in her local area, because the last roll-outs were in December. In terms of providing support, she will be aware of the partnership we now have with Citizens Advice, which will make a difference and help the most vulnerable in particular.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the changes that the Minister has proposed, but universal credit has created incredible problems in my constituency, including delays and reductions in payments. Will he outline what will be done to assist those who are already in the universal credit system and not on the pilot scheme?

Alok Sharma: The hon. Gentleman and I have discussed universal credit before and, as I have said, my door is always open. If he has specific cases, I will be happy to review them.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Over 100 MPs supported the cross-party campaign to scrap the two-child limit policy, including the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). However, some 3 million children will still be affected by the policy, even though the Government have decided to relax it somewhat. Will the Minister heed MPs' advice and scrap the policy altogether?

Alok Sharma: We have listened. In November, I spoke to the hon. Lady and other colleagues about the policy, and we have changed its retrospective nature. However, I point out that the overall policy is about fairness not only to those who receive welfare but, of course, to taxpayers.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): This Government have finally recognised the risk to women and children of giving universal credit to just one member of a household. Will the Minister now explain how the DWP will identify the main caregiver in a household and what other steps will be taken to protect women and children from domestic abuse?

Alok Sharma: Payment to a single person in a household is not a unique feature of universal credit, and such payment also exists in the legacy benefits system. The hon. Lady is right that, right now, 60% of all universal credit payments go to the female's bank account. The Secretary of State has announced that we will look at what more we can do to enable the main carer to receive universal credit, and very often that will be the female in the household.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): We have been back for only seven days and this is now the second urgent question on universal credit. Is it not time for the Secretary of State to come to the House and make a Government statement on what she intends to do about the mess of universal credit?

Alok Sharma: I am sorry that the hon. Lady is so unhappy. I would have thought that she should be welcoming all the positive changes we have been making. Indeed, the Secretary of State was before the House just last week at Work and Pensions Question Time answering questions on universal credit and other policies.

Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): When are the Government going to do something about the long-winded, cumbersome and complicated process of applying for universal credit? I have a constituent who applied in September and has received only one payment—we are now in mid-January—mainly because of mistakes made by officials in the Department. When are the Government going to do something about this?

Alok Sharma: If the hon. Gentleman has a specific case, I would be very happy to look at it. The timeliness of payments has been increasing under universal credit, but one reason why we may not be able to make full payments to people is that we are waiting to verify some of their costs, which may relate to childcare, rent or whatever. I am very happy to talk to him about the case he raises.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I know from my private conversations with the Minister that he genuinely wants this system to work, and I welcome the changes he has made. May I suggest that, when it comes to migration from existing legacy benefits, instead of requesting that the applicant provides the information, the Department uses the information already available to work out what payments should be made to the applicant?

Alok Sharma: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his kind words. Again, he raises the issue of pre-population. In our response to the Social Security Advisory Committee, we have set out what we plan to do, but the key thing is that we need to make sure that we get all the information so that we can pay people the full amount they are due.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): Last year, several newspapers carried harrowing accounts of women who were forced to seek abortions simply because of the two-child limit policy. I hear what the Minister says about retrospective changes, but how will the proposal help women who wish to go ahead with an unplanned pregnancy?

Alok Sharma: As the hon. Lady will know, we already have a set of exemptions in the policy. We recently announced two further exemptions, but the overall policy was tested in the courts last year and was found to be sound.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): When will the British Government extend the much-needed transitional protection to people who are migrating naturally through a change of circumstance?

Alok Sharma: The best way the hon. Gentleman can make sure we provide support through transitional protection for those who migrate is by supporting the regulations when we vote on them under the affirmative procedure.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Sixty bishops wrote to the Government last year condemning the two-child limit. Does the Minister counsel those bishops to advise members of their flock who are considering having a third child to exercise more social responsibility?

Alok Sharma: When I met parliamentary colleagues to discuss the two-child policy, the meeting was chaired by the Bishop of Durham. We have made changes to the policy but, overall, this is about being fair to the taxpayer while being sustainable at the same time.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Some EU citizens are now being refused universal credit as they cannot produce proof of their residency rights. This particularly affects women in caring roles who have worked less and paid less tax. I welcome the Secretary of State's wish to reduce universal credit's impact on women, so will the Department review this scandal before it becomes a new shame on universal credit?

Alok Sharma: A clear set of criteria determines whether someone can claim universal credit. If the hon. Lady has a specific case or specific sets of cases, she should come to discuss those with me.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP) *rose*—

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Ooh, what a taxing choice! I call Mr Alan Brown.

Alan Brown: A good choice, Mr Speaker.

Following on from the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), has the Minister assessed how many EU citizens who have made their lives here are now routinely being turned down for universal credit? I am thinking of people such as my constituent Laura Nani. Until we got the decision overturned last week, she would have been evicted for rent arrears, and left homeless and penniless. When will the Minister look into this? Will he apologise to my constituent for the DWP getting it wrong? I note that the Prime Minister is sitting next to him, and when I raised this matter at Prime Minister's questions, she dismissed it out of hand.

Alok Sharma: Let me be absolutely clear: when we get something wrong in the Department, we apologise, and I write to apologise to individuals and colleagues. Where there are specific cases to raise, I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman and his colleague.

Drew Hendry: You are saving the best for last, Mr Speaker.

For nearly six years, from pilot through to full service roll-out, my constituents in Inverness and then in the rest of my constituency have been suffering and reporting the flaws of universal credit to the Government. Now that the mistakes have been admitted to and the flaws have been acknowledged, what will the Minister do to compensate the people who have endured that suffering?

Alok Sharma: Overall, the universal credit policy is absolutely working. It is getting more people into work, which is ultimately what the welfare system is also about. As the hon. Gentleman knows, if he has individual cases, I am happy to take those up with him and to discuss them.

Leaving the EU

4.21 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on the further assurances and clarifications we have received from the European Union on the Northern Ireland protocol.

As a proud Unionist, I share the concerns of Members who want to ensure that in leaving the European Union we do not undermine the strength of our own Union in the UK. That was why, when the EU tried to insist on a protocol that would carve out Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK's customs territory, I said no. I secured instead a UK-wide temporary customs arrangement, avoiding both a hard border on the island of Ireland and a customs border down the Irish sea. I also negotiated substantial commitments in the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration to do everything possible to prevent the backstop ever being needed, and to ensure that if it were, it would be a temporary arrangement. But listening to the debate before Christmas, it was clear that we needed to go further, so I returned to Brussels to faithfully and firmly reflect the concerns of this House.

The conclusions of December's Council went further in addressing our concerns. They included reaffirming the EU's determination to work speedily to establish by 31 December 2020 alternative arrangements so that the backstop will not need to be triggered. They underlined that if the backstop were nevertheless to be triggered, it would indeed apply temporarily. They committed that, in such an event, the EU would use its best endeavours to continue to negotiate and conclude as soon as possible a subsequent agreement that would replace the backstop. They gave a new assurance that negotiations on the future relationship could start immediately after the UK's withdrawal.

Since the Council, and throughout the Christmas and new year period, I have spoken to a number of European leaders, and there have been further discussions with the EU to seek further assurances alongside the Council conclusions. Today, I have published the outcome of these further discussions, with an exchange of letters between the UK Government and the Presidents of the European Commission and European Council. The letter from President Tusk confirms what I said in the House before Christmas, namely that the assurances in the European Council conclusions have legal standing in the EU.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General has also written to me today confirming that in the light of the joint response from the Presidents of the European Council and the Commission, these conclusions

“would have legal force in international law”.

He set out his opinion—“reinforced” by today's letter—

“that the balance of risks favours the conclusion that it is unlikely that the EU will wish to rely on the implementation of the backstop provisions.”

Furthermore, he stated that it is therefore his judgment that

“the current draft Withdrawal Agreement now represents the only politically practicable and available means of securing our exit from the European Union.”

[The Prime Minister]

I know that some Members would ideally like a unilateral exit mechanism or a hard time limit to the backstop. I have explained this to the EU and tested these points in negotiations, but the EU would not agree to this because it fears that such a provision could allow the UK to leave the backstop at any time, without any other arrangements in place, and require a hard border to be erected between Northern Ireland and Ireland. I have been very clear with the EU that that is not something we would ever countenance—the UK is steadfast in its commitment to the Belfast agreement and would never allow a return to a hard border—but it is not enough simply to say this. Both sides also need to take steps to avoid a hard border when the UK is outside the EU. To fail to do so would place businesses on the island of Ireland in an impossible position, having to choose between costly new checks and procedures that would disrupt their supply chains or breaking the law.

We therefore have the backstop as a last resort, but both the Taoiseach and I have said consistently that the best way to avoid a hard border is through the future relationship—that is the sustainable solution—and that neither of us wants to use the backstop, so since the Council we have been looking at commitments that would ensure that we get our future relationship or alternative arrangements in place by the end of the implementation period so that there will be no need to enter the backstop and no need for any fear that there will be a hard border. That is why, in the first of the further assurances that it has provided today, the EU has committed to begin exploratory talks on the detailed legal provisions of the future relationship as soon as Parliament has approved the deal and the withdrawal agreement has been signed. The EU has been explicit that that can happen immediately after this House votes through the agreement.

If the House approved the deal tomorrow, it would give us almost two years to complete the next phase of the negotiations, and of course we would have the option to extend the implementation period, were further time needed, for either one or two years. It is my absolute conviction that we can turn the political declaration into legal text in that time, thereby avoiding the need for the backstop altogether.

The letters also make it clear that these talks should give

“particular urgency to discussion of ideas, including the use of all available facilitative arrangements and technologies, for replacing the backstop with permanent arrangements”,

and furthermore that those arrangements

“are not required to replicate”

the backstop “provisions in any respect”. So, contrary to the fears of some hon. Members, the EU will not simply insist that the backstop is the only way to avoid a hard border. It has agreed to discuss technological solutions and any alternative means of delivering on this objective, and to get on with that as a priority in the next phase of negotiations.

Secondly, the EU has now committed to a fast-track process to bring our future trade deal into force once it has been agreed. The Commission has now said that if there is any delay in ratification, it will recommend

provisionally applying the relevant parts of the agreement so that we would not need to enter the backstop. Such a provisional application process saved four years on the EU-Korea deal, and it would prevent any delays in ratification by other EU member state Parliaments from delaying our deal coming into force.

Thirdly, the EU has provided absolute clarity on the explicit linkage between the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration, and made that link clear in the way the documents are presented. I know that some colleagues are worried about an imbalance between the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration, because the EU cannot reach a legal agreement with us on the future relationship until we are a third country, but the link between them means that the commitments of one cannot be banked without the commitments of the other. The EU has been clear that they come as a package. Bad faith by either side in negotiating the legal instruments that will deliver the future relationship laid out in the political declaration would be a breach of their legal obligations under the withdrawal agreement.

Fourthly, the exchange of letters confirms that the UK can unilaterally deliver all the commitments that we made last week to safeguard the interests of the people and businesses of Northern Ireland and their position in our precious Union, for it gives clear answers to address some questions that have been raised since the deal was reached—that the deal means no change to the arrangements that underpin north-south co-operation in the Belfast agreement; that Stormont will have a lock on any new laws that the EU proposes should be added to the backstop; and that the UK can give a restored Northern Ireland Executive a seat at the table on the joint committee overseeing the deal.

President Juncker says explicitly in his letter that the backstop

“would represent a suboptimal trading arrangement for both sides.”

We have spoken at length about why we want to avoid the backstop, but it is not in the EU’s interests either, for this backstop gives the UK tariff-free access to the EU’s market, and it does so with no free movement of people, no financial contribution, no requirement to follow most of the level playing field rules and no need to allow EU boats any access to our waters for fishing. Furthermore, under these arrangements, UK authorities in Northern Ireland would clear goods for release into the EU single market with no further checks or controls. This is unprecedented and means the EU relying on the UK for the functioning of its own market, so the EU will not want this backstop to come into force, and the exchange of letters today makes it clear that, if it did, the EU would do all it could to bring it to an end as quickly as possible.

Nevertheless, I fully understand that these new assurances still will not go as far as some would like. I recognise that some Members wanted to see changes to the withdrawal agreement, a unilateral exit mechanism from the backstop, an end date or rejecting the backstop altogether, although it should be said that that would have risked other EU member states attempting to row back on the significant wins that we have already achieved, such as on control over our waters or on the sovereignty of Gibraltar. The simple truth is that the EU was not prepared to agree to this and rejecting the backstop altogether means no deal. Whatever version of the future relationship Members

might want to see—from Norway to Canada, to any number of variations—all require a withdrawal agreement, and any withdrawal agreement would contain the backstop. That will not change however the House votes tomorrow. To those who think that we should reject this deal in favour of no deal because we cannot get every assurance we want, I ask what a no-deal Brexit would do to strengthen the hand of those campaigning for Scottish independence or, indeed, of those demanding a border poll in Northern Ireland. Surely that is the real threat to our Union.

With just 74 days until 29 March, the consequences of voting against this deal tomorrow are becoming ever clearer. With no deal, we would have no implementation period, no security partnership, no guarantees for UK citizens overseas and no certainty for businesses and workers such as those I met in Stoke this morning. We would also see changes to everyday life in Northern Ireland that would put the future of our Union at risk. And if, rather than leaving with no deal, this House blocked Brexit, that would be a subversion of our democracy, saying to the people whom we were elected to serve that we were unwilling to do what they had instructed.

I say to Members from all parts of this House that, whatever you may have previously concluded, over these next 24 hours give this deal a second look. No, it is not perfect and, yes, it is a compromise, but when the history books are written, people will look at the decision of this House tomorrow and ask: did we deliver on the country's vote to leave the European Union; did we safeguard our economy, our security and our Union; or did we let the British people down? I say that we should deliver for the British people and get on with building a brighter future for our country by backing this deal tomorrow. I commend this statement to the House.

4.33 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for an advance copy of her statement.

In December, the Government shamefully pulled the meaningful vote on the Prime Minister's deal, with the promise that she would secure legal assurances from the EU that the backstop would be temporary. The Leader of the House confirmed that when she said:

"The Prime Minister is determined to get the legal reassurances that...Members want to see."—[*Official Report*, 20 December 2018; Vol. 651, c. 1013.]

The Foreign Secretary told us that the Prime Minister would "find a way" to win tomorrow's Commons vote by getting assurances with "legal force" that the Irish border backstop is only temporary. On receiving today's letter to the Prime Minister from the Presidents of the European Commission and the Council, it must now be clear to all Members across this House that, yet again, the Prime Minister has completely and utterly failed to do that. Today's letter is nothing more than a repetition of exactly the same position that was pulled more than one month ago. It categorically does not give the legal assurances that this House was promised, and contains nothing but warm words and aspirations.

Is it not the case that absolutely nothing has changed from the Attorney General's letter of advice to the Cabinet? His advice, which the Government tried to hide, explained with great clarity the reasons why the

UK could find itself locked into the Northern Ireland backstop protocol with no legal escape route. Today's letter means nothing. The truth remains that by the end of 2020 the UK will face a choice of either extending the transition period, which comes at an unknown financial cost, or falling into the backstop, which the Attorney General has said endures indefinitely until such time as an agreement supersedes it.

The Attorney General has updated his legal advice today, as the Prime Minister just said, and he clearly says that the assurances do not alter the "fundamental meanings" as he advised the Government in November. If there were legally binding assurances on the temporary nature of the backstop, surely they would have been written into the withdrawal agreement itself. The letter published this morning is clear that this is not possible, saying,

"we are not in a position to agree to anything that changes or is inconsistent with the Withdrawal Agreement".

This morning's joint letter does say that

"negotiations can start as soon as possible after the withdrawal of the United Kingdom."

But my question to the Prime Minister is: how is that possible when the Cabinet cannot agree it amongst themselves? That is why the political declaration is so vague. Actually, I believe that the right word is "nebulous".

Given that the Prime Minister has failed to secure the promised changes, there can be no question of once again ducking accountability and avoiding tomorrow's vote: no more playing for time; no more running down the clock to scare people into backing this damaging shambles of a deal. I am sure that Members across the House will not be fooled by what has been produced today. It is clear that what we are voting on this week is exactly the same deal that we should have voted on in December. I am sure the Prime Minister knows this, which is why today she is trying to blame others for this chaos.

Given the lack of support for the Prime Minister's deal, we might have thought that she would try to reach out to MPs. Instead she is claiming that, by failing to support her botched deal, Members are threatening to undermine the faith of the British people in our democracy. The only people who are undermining faith in our democracy are the Government themselves. I can think of no greater example of democracy in action than for this House to reject a deal that is clearly bad for this country. During the past two years of shambolic negotiations the Prime Minister has failed to listen. She has not once tried to work with Parliament to construct a Brexit deal that this House and the country can support, and now she is left facing a humiliating defeat and is blaming everybody but herself.

If this deal is rejected tomorrow—and I hope it is—the blame will lie firmly with the Government and firmly at the feet of the Prime Minister. There is a deal that could command support in the House that would include a new and comprehensive customs union, a strong single market relationship, and a guarantee to keep pace with European Union rights and standards. Instead, the Prime Minister still chooses to take the most reckless path.

As we enter the week of the meaningful vote, we should remember that the meaningful vote is only happening because of pressure from the Opposition in

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this House. Let us remember the incompetence that we have been forced to endure. We have seen two years of shambolic negotiations; red lines announced, then cast aside. We are now on our third Brexit Secretary, all of whom have been largely excluded from the vital stages of the negotiations. We were promised the easiest trade deal in history, yet we have seen a divided Government deliver a botched withdrawal deal with nothing more than a vague outline of what our future relationship with the EU will be. Meanwhile, conditions in this country for millions of people continue to get worse. We just had an urgent question about universal credit and the disaster that is for millions of people in this country.

The Government are in disarray. It is clear: if the Prime Minister's deal is rejected tomorrow, it is time for a general election; it is time for a new Government.

The Prime Minister: I am not sure that there were many questions to me in the response that the right hon. Gentleman gave, but let me respond to some of the points of fact that he referenced, some of which were perhaps not as correct as they might have been.

The right hon. Gentleman said that there is no legal termination mechanism in the withdrawal agreement on the backstop. There is, but the point is that it is not a unilateral termination mechanism—it is a termination mechanism that requires agreement between the two parties.

The right hon. Gentleman said that in December 2020 we would face either having the backstop or the implementation period extension. Of course, the point is that we are negotiating to ensure that at that point no such choice will be necessary because we will have the future arrangement in place.

The right hon. Gentleman says that it is not possible to start the negotiations as soon as the meaningful vote has been held and agreement has been given to the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration. Indeed, Whitehall stands ready to start those negotiations. We have been looking at this, because we know the basis of those negotiations—it is in the political declaration—and everybody is ready to start those as soon as possible.

The right hon. Gentleman talked at the end about universal credit. May I just remind him that under this Government 3.4 million more jobs have been created? That means all those people being able to earn a regular wage to help support their families. Under universal credit, we see a system that is helping people get into the workplace rather than leaving them living on benefits for nearly a decade, as happened under the last Labour Government.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman called, as he does regularly, for a general election. Here, as I think we saw yesterday, he is not thinking about the national interest—he is merely playing politics, because yesterday, when asked whether, if there was a general election, he would actually campaign to leave the European Union, he refused to answer that question five times. We know where we stand—we are leaving the European Union and this Government will deliver it.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister on getting rather further than I thought she would with the assurances and the letters that she has obtained, but I fear it will do no good,

because she is up against two bodies of opinion. One is the hard-line Brexiteers on this side, and the Leader of the Opposition and his Front Bench, who think that if they cause crisis and deadlock it will result in leaving with no deal. The others are a lot of hard-line remainers, largely on the Labour Back Benches, who think that if they cause chaos and deadlock it will lead to a second referendum. One of them is wrong, but the problem is that she is up against both of them.

Does the Prime Minister accept that if we lift our eyes from the present chaos and look to what the country needs, beyond our leaving the EU, if the House of Commons can insist on doing that, we need a permanently open border in Ireland for treaty and security reasons, and we need a permanently open border, for economic reasons, across the channel for our trade and investment? Does she accept that it is difficult to proceed until there is some consensus for that across the House of Commons, and it does not look as though we are going to get there by 29 March, which is a date that should obviously be delayed?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his points. I do not believe that the date of 29 March should be delayed. He set out that there are those who want to see no deal and those who want to see a second referendum and potentially frustrate Brexit. The inexorable logic of that, if this House wants to ensure that we deliver on Brexit for the British people, is to back the deal that will be before the House tomorrow.

Obviously we want to ensure that there is a consistently and sustainably open border into the long term between Northern Ireland and Ireland. That is our commitment—to ensure that there is no hard border there. There would be economic advantage in an open border and frictionless trade between the UK and the European Union, and that is exactly the proposal that the Government have put forward.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I thank the Prime Minister for an advance copy of her statement, though I am left asking myself, “Is that it? Is that all you've got, Prime Minister?” Nothing has fundamentally changed. It is a wishlist.

With little more than 24 hours until this House votes on the Prime Minister's deal, she has come back completely humiliated. The letters published between the UK Government and the European Union reveal that she has utterly failed to get the concessions she promised. The EU letter explicitly insists that there cannot be any renegotiation of the backstop or the withdrawal agreement. It states:

“we are not in a position to agree to anything that changes or is inconsistent with the Withdrawal Agreement”.

The Prime Minister is simply in fantasy land, presenting her statement as bringing changes when it does not. This Government must stop threatening no deal. It is time to face reality, extend article 50 and let the people decide.

In Scotland, people know that it is the Tory Government dragging Scotland out of the European Union against our will. It is the Tories treating the Scottish Parliament with contempt, and it is this Prime Minister and this Tory party who continue to silence Scotland's voice and sideline our interests. The Prime Minister said this morning:

“What if we found ourselves in a situation where Parliament tried to take the UK out of the EU in opposition to a remain vote? People’s faith in the democratic process and their politicians would suffer catastrophic harm”,

and yet she is demanding precisely that of Scotland, taking Scotland out of the EU in opposition to an overwhelming remain vote. To people in Scotland, the Prime Minister has made it clear time and time again that our voices are not to be listened to. She talks about respecting the results of referendums, but this is the same Prime Minister who voted against Welsh devolution and voted to wreck the Scottish devolution referendum result.

This is a defining moment. The people of Scotland know more than ever what comes from a Tory Government we did not vote for. Why does the Prime Minister continue to ignore Scotland’s voice and Scotland’s interests? Why is she so petrified of allowing the people to decide, now that we know the facts? If she is not, will she now do the right thing—extend article 50 and let the people decide?

The Prime Minister: The people across the United Kingdom did decide; they decided in June 2016 that we should leave the European Union, and it is absolutely right that this Government are committed to delivering on the vote of the British people.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about the interests of Scotland. As he knows, the interests of Scotland are best served by ensuring that Scotland remains a part of the United Kingdom. If the Scottish National party is so clear that politicians should listen to the voice of the people, it should listen to the voice of the Scottish people expressed in the referendum in 2014 and abandon the idea of independence.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Given that the EU intends to take huge sums of money and powers off us in return for just 21 or 45 months of more talks and massive uncertainty, why should we ever believe the EU would give us a good deal when it pockets all that it wants up front?

The Prime Minister: Throughout the negotiations, we have actually ensured that the European Union has had to concede to the United Kingdom Government in a whole range of areas on which it did not wish to concede. If we look into the future, my right hon. Friend and I do have a difference of opinion on this in that he believes that World Trade Organisation terms are right for our future trade with the European Union, but I think that a more ambitious free trade agreement between us and the European Union is what is right. That is what is set out in the political declaration, and that is what I believe is the good deal for the UK in leaving the EU.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): The Prime Minister has confirmed today that, under her deal, Britain will remain between two and four years—possibly longer—in a customs union. The Leader of the Opposition is supporting Brexit with a somewhat longer period in a customs union. With that relatively small difference, are they not essentially two peas in a pod?

The Prime Minister: No, definitely not.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm what she said at Stoke today: namely, that she will never extend—never extend—the date of our leaving beyond 29 March this year, and never in any circumstances whatsoever allow the repeal of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, or of the repeal of the European Communities Act 1972 under that Act?

The Prime Minister: I did indeed confirm that our intent and what the Government are working for is to leave the European Union on 29 March. There are those who may try to find ways to prevent that from happening—I think that is a real risk—but the Government are firm in their commitment in relation to leaving the European Union.

On the issue that my hon. Friend has raised on the withdrawal Act, we have passed the withdrawal Act through this House—through this Parliament—and it does repeal the European Communities Act 1972. Of course, for the period of the implementation period, it would be necessary within the WAB—the withdrawal agreement Bill—as my hon. Friend knows, to ensure that we are still able to maintain the rules that we need to operate by in order to abide by the negotiated agreement on the implementation period, but I can assure him that it remains the commitment of this Government to leave the European Union on 29 March.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I know the Prime Minister is totally sincere in her sense of duty to this country and in her belief in her deal, but I want to turn her attention to something she does not want to contemplate, which is defeat tomorrow night. I say to her in the strongest terms that the tone and substance she strikes in the wake of that eventuality will define her legacy to this country. I want to urge her not to succumb to the absurd argument that this is a war between this House and the Government, when this Government are a servant of this House. I want to urge her also, if she loses tomorrow night, to give this House an open and honest process where it can express its view, and she and the Government then become the servant of this House in the negotiations.

The Prime Minister: The Government are the servant of the people: we are ensuring that we are delivering what the people want in relation to Brexit. We have negotiated what I believe genuinely is a good deal for the United Kingdom, and that is why I will continue to encourage Members of this House to support it.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): It is absolutely clear: the British Government, the Irish Government and the European Union have always said that there will be no hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic, and today’s border works perfectly satisfactorily with electronic means. It is extraordinary and exasperating that we are still stuck on the question of the backstop, when the Prime Minister has met technical experts who know that existing techniques and processes could deliver smooth delivery of that border. What meetings have been held since she met those experts prior to pulling the vote in December?

The Prime Minister: It is exactly those sorts of technological solutions that we are committed to pursuing. As I said to my right hon. Friend when he brought a

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proposal to me, the proposal he brought to me did not fully address all the issues in relation to the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, but we are continuing to look—and will look actively and with the European Union—at the ways in which we could ensure that those alternative arrangements would deal with the issue that we are addressing.

May I also say to my right hon. Friend that it is not the case that the European Union has said that there will be no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland? The no-deal plans published by the European Commission in December make it clear that there will be no flexibility on border checks in no deal, so the Irish Government will be expected to apply EU checks in full.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): To be fair to the EU, it has made it clear that there will be no changes to the withdrawal agreement, and there is nothing in these letters that is inconsistent with the withdrawal agreement. To be fair to the Attorney General, he says in his letter today that the letters do not alter the fundamental meanings of its provisions. Five weeks after the Prime Minister pulled the vote, saying that there had to be a legally binding assurance, will she admit that nothing has fundamentally changed? That is the reality; let us not kid ourselves about that. In pulling the vote, she must have realised that there needed to be legally binding changes to the withdrawal agreement for it to have any chance of getting through this House. Even at this late stage, does she not accept that the problem with the backstop is that it effectively defines the future relationship for Northern Ireland, because if the whole of the UK is not aligned to a high degree for single market purposes and we are not in a customs union, Northern Ireland will be?

The Prime Minister: It was right that I took the views of this House. The overwhelming view of this House on the backstop was that people wanted to ensure that it would not carry on indefinitely or be a permanent arrangement. The right hon. Gentleman has just indicated that he thinks that that is the case for the backstop. What we have received from the European Union are those further assurances and the recognition that the European Council conclusion in which some of those assurances are referred to does have legal force in international law and effectively sits alongside the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration package, and that it would be part of any consideration on any challenge to the withdrawal agreement in relation to those particular issues.

I recognise that what I have brought back, as I said in my statement, is not what some Members wanted from the European Union, but it is not the case that this has not gone further than when we were initially discussing the debate. There have been some further assurances from the European Union, but I accept that they are not the same level of assurances that some Members of this House wished for.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): The Prime Minister is right when she says that she is the servant of the people. There are 2 million young people who were not able to vote back in 2016, two and a half years ago. [Interruption.] I am so sorry that hon. Members on this side of the House seem to be in some way dismissing

those young people. They are the future of our country. The Treasury's own analysis shows that, whichever way we cut it, Brexit is going to make our country poorer. Why should those young people not have a right to a say in their future, given that they will bear the brunt of Brexit? Why, when the Prime Minister's deal fails tomorrow, can it not go back to the British people, so that everybody, especially young people, can have their say on their future and on Brexit?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend has asked me questions in relation to putting a decision back to the British people in the past, as have other hon. and right hon. Members, and referred to a new generation of young people who were not able to vote in the 2016 referendum. This House was very clear that this was a decision to be taken in that referendum and that Government would abide by the decision that was taken in that referendum, and 80% of the votes cast at the last general election were for parties that said that they would respect the result of the referendum. I believe that we should respect the result of the referendum and ensure that we deliver leaving the European Union.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): We will find out tomorrow evening whether the House is willing to support the Prime Minister's deal, but what is now clear is that the EU will not be able to offer any further help, because as long as it continues to say

“we are not in a position to agree to anything that changes...the Withdrawal Agreement”,

a number of her Back Benchers will not be reassured. While the Prime Minister will, for the next 26 hours at least, argue that we should back her deal, can I invite her today to commit, if she loses, to reaching out across the House to try to find a way out of the crisis that is facing our country that can command the support of Parliament, and if it is necessary in order to do that, to being willing to seek an extension to article 50?

The Prime Minister: Of course, the House will give its view tomorrow night. I will be continuing to encourage Members of this House to vote for what I believe to be a good deal. The right hon. Gentleman might have noticed that, actually, I have been meeting and hearing from Members from across the House on this particular issue. I continue to believe that this is a good deal, because it delivers on the referendum. It is crucial that this House delivers on the referendum and does so in a way that protects people's jobs and security, and gives certainty to businesses. That is why I believe it is a good deal.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): No one is ever going to get what they fully want out of negotiations, but the very simple fact is that all the leaders of our major industries, including Rolls-Royce, Toyota and Jaguar Land Rover, have said that this is the right deal for them to continue winning markets and employing people in this country. Is that not one of the most important decisions we should bear in mind in trying to protect manufacturing jobs and our country's future?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, but it is not just leaders of manufacturing industry. He is absolutely right that they have made clear it that this is a good deal and a deal that should be supported,

but others have too. For example, Scottish fishermen and farmers have also been saying that this is a deal that should be supported. When Members think about the jobs of their constituents, it is important that they remember that.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The Prime Minister comes hot-foot from her speech in Stoke where she commanded us to honour the result of the referendum, yet in 1997 she voted against legislation to establish the National Assembly of Wales and in 2005 she stood on a manifesto calling for another referendum, with the option to overturn the result. How does the Prime Minister square her personal track record on referendums with such commands?

The Prime Minister: The Conservative party went into opposition in 1997. We accepted the result of the referendum vote in Wales. *[Interruption.]* Yes. We made clear at the time that we respected the result of that referendum in Wales. I think anybody who sees the Welsh Assembly today, and what it has been doing over recent years, will recognise that that was the right decision.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for listening to the concerns of hon. Members, and for seeking to obtain further concessions and clarifications from the European Union, but does not the use of the words by Presidents Juncker and Tusk that

“we are not in a position to agree to anything that changes or is inconsistent with the Withdrawal Agreement,”

simply serve to underline those concerns and make it all the more likely that hon. Members will reject the withdrawal agreement tomorrow?

The Prime Minister: The concern that Members overwhelmingly raised was the issue of whether or not the backstop could continue indefinitely. The European Union, within the withdrawal agreement in a number of ways, makes it clear that the backstop can only be a temporary arrangement. It has given further assurance in Council conclusions, which, as I say, have legal force in international law. That has been confirmed here in the UK, so it has gone further than it did within the withdrawal agreement. I have said to the House on many occasions that there is no deal with the European Union that does not involve a withdrawal agreement and there is no deal that does not involve having a backstop, as a commitment to the people of Northern Ireland that there will be no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Prime Minister called on everyone this morning to

“move beyond division and come together”.

Does she not recognise that she has made the divisions worse and made it harder for people to come together by not consulting either Parliament or the public on her red lines or the negotiating objectives, and by ducking and delaying votes? Does she not recognise that brinkmanship is the worst possible way to make such big decisions for the future of our country? Will she tell the House now that she has not ruled out extending article 50 if her plan is rejected tomorrow?

The Prime Minister: As I have said on many occasions in this House—I have come regularly to the House and answered questions from Members on the position that the Government have been taking on these particular matters—I am clear, and it is in our legislation, that we should leave the European Union on 29 March this year.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister reconfirm to the House that whatever the future trading relationship that the United Kingdom wishes to have with the European Union, the withdrawal agreement is clearly absolutely necessary to securing it?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The point is that there are two issues: how we leave the European Union and what our future relationship will be. Any trade agreement that we would wish to agree with the European Union will require us to have agreed the details of the withdrawal agreement. As I have said previously, any withdrawal agreement will include a backstop.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I am looking for a new, young Member. I call Mr Barry Sheerman.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Will the Prime Minister go back to that very good question asked by her colleague the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), who made a very intelligent plea for more time? This decision will be one of the most important we take in 100 years, let alone this century. Why should we rush it? It is complex, and the Prime Minister’s statement today shows how complex it is. We need more time. Why can we not have it?

The Prime Minister: On 29 March, it will be almost three years since people voted for us to leave the European Union. This House voted overwhelmingly to trigger article 50 in the knowledge that the process had a set time and that that meant we would be leaving on a particular date.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The withdrawal agreement is a draft international treaty. If we were to vote for it tomorrow and then ratify it, it would be binding upon us in international law. It would outrank legally any motion or amendment of this House, or even an Act of Parliament. The agreement confirms that in black and white in article 4 on page 11. The question is whether the letters have any legal power over the treaty. The Prime Minister quoted from the operative paragraph 2 of the Attorney General’s advice. Forgive me, but she quoted selectively. The paragraph, which is brief, reads:

“I agree that in the light of this response, the Council’s conclusions of 13 December 2018 would have legal force in international law and thus be relevant and cognisable in the interpretation of the Withdrawal Agreement, and in particular the Northern Ireland Protocol, albeit they do not alter the fundamental meanings of its provisions as I advised them to be on 13 November 2018.”

In other words, the letters do not overrule the treaty. They are a fig leaf, and a small fig leaf at that. Is that not true?

The Prime Minister: The letters are additional to the text in the treaty and they do have force in international law. I say to my right hon. Friend that I was clear in my

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statement, and I have said since, that I recognise that what we have from the European Union does not go as far as some Members of this House would like and prefer it to go, but we have those further assurances that sit alongside the withdrawal agreement. In any position in which the backstop within the withdrawal agreement was being challenged, they would be part of that consideration. As has been said, they have force in international law.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): To be clear on the Prime Minister's strategy, she is asking us to trust her and agree to get past exit day before we even start to negotiate the whole future relationship between the EU and the UK. Does she not accept that that would be a massive leap in the dark? Anything could happen in that two-year period. For example, who will be her successor concluding those negotiations?

The Prime Minister: The political declaration sets out the instructions to the negotiators for the next stage in relation not just to the trade arrangements but to the security arrangements and some issues underpinning all of those, such as the questions of data exchange. Those are the instructions according to which the negotiators for the next stage will be working in order to change it into a legal text. It is not possible for the EU to agree a legally binding text of the trade agreement with a country that is a member of the EU; it has to wait until we are a third country and outside the EU.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): The Prime Minister will have read the comments from leading European Commission officials at the very highest levels about the withdrawal agreement since it was finalised. Sabine Weyand, Michel Barnier's deputy, has said:

"This requires the Customs Union as the basis for the future relationship".

She has also said:

"They must align their rules, but the EU will retain all the controls".

Finally, she said:

"The EU retains its leverage".

Martin Selmayr, the secretary-general of the Commission, has said:

"The power is with us".

He also told the *Passauer Neue Presse* on 7 December that the agreement showed that

"leaving the EU...doesn't work".

Those in Brussels clearly believe it is a great deal for them. Why is the Prime Minister seemingly equally enthusiastic in thinking this is a great deal for the UK?

The Prime Minister: I know that a number of Members were concerned about the phraseology in the political declaration around the future relationship in relation to customs and about building on the protocol and the assumption that therefore what was in the protocol would effectively have to be taken forward into that future relationship. In fact, the letters we have received today from the EU make it clear that that is not the case. My right hon. Friend asks why I believe this is a good deal. I believe it is a good deal because, as I have said previously, it delivers on the vote of the referendum—control of money, borders and laws; out of the common fisheries policy and common agricultural policy; the

ability to have an independent trade policy—and enables us to do so in a way that protects jobs and security and gives certainty to businesses.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I genuinely respect the Prime Minister's willingness to come back time after time to talk to Parliament and the public about her deal, even if today she has not really brought back anything very different—if we are honest. Will she state very clearly that this Parliament voted to give the people the opportunity to decide whether to leave or not to leave, not this Parliament, and will she therefore state categorically that, whatever happens tomorrow night and in the next few weeks, we will be leaving on 29 March, because that is what the people voted for?

The Prime Minister: We will be leaving the EU on 29 March. I believe it is important that Parliament delivers on the vote that people took in 2016. As I just said in response to the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), Parliament voted to trigger article 50 with the two-year timeframe it contained. For the sake of our democracy, it is important that we deliver on the Brexit vote in 2016.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): In Wakefield on Saturday, a man approached me to say that, on the day the Prime Minister delayed the vote, his business lost a multi-million-pound contract and, as a result, his order book was empty and redundancies were starting. Her delay has achieved nothing, apart from paradoxically leaving her a little safer in her job, thanks to surviving a vote of no confidence, and my constituents quite a lot less safe in their jobs. After her deal is voted down tomorrow, will she extend article 50 and work across the House to give our constituents the option to vote again but this time on what they know will happen, which is continued uncertainty in the trading relationship between their businesses and the EU for at least the next four years?

The Prime Minister: Business is absolutely clear that the certainty it requires is the certainty that will be given by agreeing this deal.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): To guarantee Brexit, the Prime Minister should prorogue Parliament until April—tempting, isn't it?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is trying to tempt me down a road that I do not think I should go down. Were Parliament to prorogue until April, I would be denied the opportunity to see my right hon. Friend and answer his questions on a regular basis, and that would be very sad.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I accept that the Prime Minister has tried her best, but does she not accept that everything she has said today does not alter the fact that she has no majority in this Parliament and no authority in the country, and that her Government now serve no useful purpose?

The Prime Minister: I say to the right hon. Gentleman that the Government are getting on with what we believe is right in putting a deal to this Parliament to deliver on Brexit and for the British people. I also say to him that this is not the only thing that this Government have been involved in. I would hope that, when he talks about what the Government have been doing, he would recognise the importance of the long-term plan for the

national health service and the significant investment in the national health service that the Government have agreed and are going to put in.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): In her statement, my right hon. Friend pointed out that the EU will not agree to an end date to the backstop or a unilateral exit mechanism. Does that make her doubt its sincerity when it says that it does not really want the backstop?

The Prime Minister: The concern that the European Union has about those two options are, as I said in my statement, that somehow the United Kingdom would engineer a situation where it simply pulled out and there was a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. It wants to guarantee that there would be no such hard border.

I have said to the European Union that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom: we want to guarantee that commitment to the people of Northern Ireland—it is important, because they are part of the United Kingdom. But the European Union has been clear that in every circumstance, whatever trade agreement was negotiated in future and whatever the withdrawal agreement, it would require a backstop to be part of that.

What we can do is ensure that we get the future relationship in place, such that the backstop is never needed and that, were it to be needed, it would be only temporary. It is getting that future relationship in place that enables us to ensure the long-term sustainability of the guarantee that we have given the people of Northern Ireland.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): In spite of what we heard from the Prime Minister just a few minutes ago, she was one of 144 Tory MPs who voted against the foundation of the Welsh Assembly back in December 1999; that was 18 months after the referendum result. Why was it acceptable for her to do that then, given that today she has ruled out the opportunity for this country, including 2 million young people who did not have a say back in 2016, to have a people's vote on the actual terms of the withdrawal agreement?

The Prime Minister: I did not answer the specific point about young people when my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) raised that question, so I would like to address it now.

I recognise that there are people today who are now eligible to vote who were not eligible to vote in 2016. But I have to say to Members who say that that is a reason for having a second vote that actually, regardless of how that vote went, people could say in two years' time that there was another group of young people who should be voting and therefore we should have another vote. No, Parliament was clear: the decision in 2016 was a decision that would be delivered.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Tempting as it is to sex up international law by talking about fig leaves, could the Prime Minister confirm to me that the status of these letters from the EU today is that they are legally binding if we were to have, say, an arbitration under international law in the future?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to respond to my hon. Friend, who, with her legal experience, has rather more experience of these matters than I do. That is right: the letters do have that legal force and they would be taken into account. In looking at any arbitration or dispute that arose, they would be part of the consideration that would be taken into account, so they do have that legal force.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): May I gently say to the Prime Minister that whatever our views on Brexit across the House, we are all patriots? It is not subversive to take a different view from the Prime Minister; it is simply democracy in action. It is not subversive because otherwise the position that the Prime Minister and the Conservative party took for nearly eight years after Welsh devolution would also have been subversive. It was not: it was just a different point of view.

I am very proud that the Welsh Assembly is in my constituency, and that it is there today. Does the Prime Minister not agree that there is a fundamental difference between Welsh devolution and Brexit? Support for Welsh devolution grew, which is why the Prime Minister was not successful in her call for another referendum or abolition of the Welsh Assembly. Support for Brexit has fallen, and that is exactly why we need to put it back to the people.

The Prime Minister: I am afraid I do not accept the underlying premise of the hon. Gentleman's question, which is that support for Brexit has fallen. There are indeed people who say that they voted leave but would now vote to remain. There are also people who say that they voted remain but would now vote to leave the European Union. The overwhelming view that is expressed to me when I knock on doors and hear from people directly is that they just want the Government to get on with the job that the people gave the Government—the job of leaving the EU.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Last week the shadow Brexit secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), implied that he supported much of the withdrawal agreement, but would vote against it because he wanted more clarity on the long-term relationship. However, the EU has made it clear that we cannot have the clarity on the long-term relationship before the withdrawal agreement: the horse must come before the cart. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is the Opposition who are being reckless in jeopardising our chances of moving on with the negotiations before Europe shuts for its elections?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has made a very important point about the timing. In agreeing the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration, we have the opportunity to start those negotiations—to get that work going—before the European parliamentary elections take place in the summer. It is indeed right that the European Union cannot negotiate that legally binding text and sign up to it until we are outside the EU, but is willing to start the negotiations so we can ensure that we are in the best place possible to deliver the future relationship in December 2020.

Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): Why is the Prime Minister prepared to hold the House to ransom? She knows that she will lose the vote tomorrow,

[*Sir Mark Hendrick*]

and she still insists on the exit date of 29 March in spite of calls for article 50 to be extended. Would she really want to see this country crash out of the EU, with all the losses of jobs and business that would go with that?

The Prime Minister: I have made it very clear that if people want to avoid no deal, what they should be doing is supporting this deal. As I am sure the hon. Gentleman will know, businesses such as BAE Systems have said that it is a good deal and should be supported.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): The Prime Minister is aware that many of us have wished her well in these negotiations, but in the absence of any legal certainty about the UK's right to leave the backstop unilaterally—something that my amendment (f) seeks to address—what certainty is there that the EU will not drag out the trade negotiations so that in, say, five years' time we are still discussing the issue?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend and I have discussed this before. The European Union does not see the situation that would exist if the trade negotiations were continuing for some considerable time, and if the backstop had come into existence, as a good place for the EU. Tariff-free access to EU markets without paying any money, with no free movement of people and with no access for EU boats to our fishing waters, is not a good place for the European Union to be in.

As I explained, the reason why the EU is concerned about the idea of a unilateral exit mechanism is that it does not want to see circumstances in which the UK pulled out of the backstop and left the creation of a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. I suspect that my hon. Friend does not trust the European Union not to try to keep us in the backstop. The EU's concern is about whether it can trust us not to effectively leave a situation in which there was a hard border. What we have been working at is finding a compromise between the two in which we can all have confidence.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Prime Minister claims that the possibility of no Brexit would be a subversion of democracy. Is it not true that the real subversion of democracy is a Prime Minister who has consistently sought to shut Parliament out of this process from the very beginning, and who now refuses to go to the people to see whether they are still satisfied with a deal that bears no resemblance to the one that they were promised two and a half years ago? Why will she not go to the people? Why is she so afraid to put her deal to the people? If they still like it, they will vote for it, but if they do not, they should have the right to remain.

The Prime Minister: When people voted in the referendum in 2016 they wanted—in the words used at the time and that I have used since—control of our borders, our money and our laws; this deal delivers on that. They wanted us to be able to have an independent trade policy; this deal delivers on that. They wanted us to be out of the CAP and CFP; this deal delivers on that. I think we should be delivering what people voted for in 2016.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on standing firm on the date. Does she agree that, bearing in mind the track record of

the EU and the difficulty we have had in negotiating anything like a fair trade deal, the only way we will actually achieve one is when we leave the EU, regain our sovereignty and sit down and discuss properly with it a fair trade deal—which I am personally convinced we will reach, and very quickly?

The Prime Minister: We have the outline of that free trade deal with the EU; we have set that out in the political declaration. We have the opportunity and commitment to ensure that that can be put in place by December 2020 by agreeing the withdrawal agreement and the package with the political declaration, and I believe that is the right thing to do.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Last week Parliament voted in favour of two amendments tabled from the Back Benches, by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and by the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve). The support for those amendments against the wishes of the Government makes it clear that Parliament does not support leaving the EU without a deal. The Prime Minister said in her statement just now that no deal would mean no implementation period, no security arrangements in place and no certainty for businesses and workers, and would put the future of Northern Ireland at risk. Given how catastrophic the Prime Minister accepts a no-deal Brexit would be, will she now rule it out and instead look to extend article 50 if and when Parliament rejects her deal tomorrow?

The Prime Minister: It is very simple; either we have no deal or we have a deal. The deal on the table is a good deal for the UK and the EU has made clear that it is the deal.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): The Prime Minister is working extremely hard and robustly in the best interests of the people of this country. Does she agree that our democracy will be damaged if we do not deliver on Brexit?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I do agree with my hon. Friend, because many people who voted in the referendum in 2016 had not voted before or had not voted for some considerable time, and I think their faith in politics, and indeed the faith in politics of all those who voted to leave the EU, would be damaged if we did not deliver on that. I think it is very simple: we asked the people what their view was and said we would do what they decided, and we should now do it.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): It was the Prime Minister's absolute conviction in 2017 that it was not in the country's interests to hold a general election. It is now the Prime Minister's absolute conviction that we will secure a legal deal setting out our future relationship with the EU by December 2022 at the latest, albeit six and a half years after the Brexit vote. Why should we believe the Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: The commitment to that and the determination to reach that point is not simply something I have said. It is there in the documents; it is a commitment from the UK Government and the EU.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Will the Prime Minister confirm that whatever tactics are used by the Labour party—whatever Trump-style shutdown threats to Government finances it may bring to this House—she is determined that we should leave the EU on 29 March, and does she also agree that while no deal would not be ideal, it would not be the end of the world either?

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier today, of course there would be damage to the economy; there would be an impact and consequences from no deal, and I have set them out. Over time the UK could recover from that, but I believe that, as my hon. Friend says, it is important that we deliver leaving the EU, and I am concerned about attempts that could be made to try to find ways of effectively rejecting the vote of the British people in 2016. I believe we should deliver Brexit, and this Government will do so.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): The Prime Minister said that she had listened to the previous debates and withdrew the vote so that she could focus on the backstop, but the truth is that concerns about trade and Dover were raised three times more often than concerns about the backstop. What negotiations has she had with the EU about trade and the border at Dover in the past few weeks, and what changes has she brought back to the House?

The Prime Minister: The political declaration sets out an ambitious trade arrangement with the European Union for the future. It sets out clearly a number of specifics in relation to the customs arrangements across the border between the United Kingdom and the European Union at the various border points. What we now see is a clear commitment from the European Union to the nature of that political declaration, and the fact that it is part of the package with the withdrawal agreement.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Will the Prime Minister provide assurances to the distribution, exporting, technological and manufacturing businesses in my constituency that if and when the deal is passed, as I hope it will be, she will move quickly to put in place our future arrangements, in order to give those businesses—and most importantly their employees, who are my constituents—the certainty that they need?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We should consider those businesses, those employers and the constituents who are employed by them. Indeed I will move quickly. It is clear now from the EU, and once the withdrawal agreement has had the agreement of this House, we can sit down and start the work of putting the future relationship in place such that it is there at the end of the implementation period and there is a smooth and orderly exit for businesses and their employees in this country.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): In May 2012, the Government asked the people of Sheffield to vote in a referendum on whether they wanted a city Mayor. Sheffield rejected that proposal by 65%, but the Government went on to impose a mayoral model three years later. Why is it right for the Government to ignore the wishes of the people in one referendum but to say that they will abide by the wishes of the people in another?

The Prime Minister: In 2016, as part of the campaign for the referendum, the Government, who took the position that they supported remaining in the European Union, sent out a leaflet to every household in the United Kingdom in which they clearly said that they would abide by the decision of the referendum.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that, contrary to the assertions made by President Macron and others, in the event of a backstop, which would be undesirable for both sides, there would be no more common access to our waters for EU fishing vessels?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I can confirm that to my hon. Friend. It is clear that if no agreement has been reached on this matter, there will be no access to our waters for EU boats in the circumstances in which the backstop is in place. That is one of the reasons why the European Union will not consider that to be a good place for it to be.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): In the Prime Minister's Lancaster House speech, she said that a future agreement with the EU would be concluded by the time the article 50 process had finished. That was to be used for businesses to implement the deal during the transition period. That is now not the case, is it?

The Prime Minister: We have the framework for that future relationship in the political declaration, we have the commitment that we can start work on that quickly, and we have the implementation period for businesses.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her determination to secure a deal that protects jobs across Erewash. Can she also confirm that the EU27 have committed to work at a rapid pace to get future trade deals in place so that we will never need the backstop?

The Prime Minister: Yes, that is one of the things that we have now seen confirmed by the European Union. That is indeed its commitment. It wants to ensure that we can work together so that we get that future relationship in place at the end of the implementation period and so that the backstop need never be used.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister recognise that by threatening Members of Parliament with a democratic catastrophe if we vote against her job-destroying deal, she is embracing not only the hand of President Trump, but his methods? Will she now say, explicitly and for the particular benefit of those who threaten Members of Parliament both online and on our streets, that her Government losing tomorrow's vote would not undermine democracy and that, on the contrary, it would show that no one, particularly not this failing Government, is above our parliamentary sovereignty?

The Prime Minister: What I have said would undermine democracy—I am clear about this—would be the failure of this Parliament to deliver on the vote of the British people and to deliver Brexit. However, there should be none of the sort of behaviour that we have seen online or physically in relation to Members of this House or other members of the public regarding their views on the European Union. I have absolutely no truck with that.

[*The Prime Minister*]

That aggressive and vicious attitude is absolutely wrong. I say to the hon. Lady that this deal protects jobs and that what would have a negative impact on jobs would be to leave the European Union without a deal.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Much of the concern about the Northern Ireland backstop relates to trust, so will the Prime Minister confirm my understanding of one of the reassurances that she has secured, which is that even if EU member states have not ratified a future trade agreement, that agreement would still be applied in order to avoid the backstop? That would mean that we would not be hostage to those in any regional Parliament, such as the Walloons or anyone else, in the way that the Canadian agreement was.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. It is normal practice in trade agreements to enable them to be provisionally brought into place while ratification processes are being undertaken. We have been clear that that is what we would do, and the European Commission has been clear that it would recommend that that is what the European Union should do. The agreement could therefore be put in place and the backstop would not need to be used, and it would not be hostage to those ratification processes.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Downing Street has repeatedly briefed that the Prime Minister intends to support the amendments tabled by the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) and the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) tomorrow. However, earlier on in this process, the Government argued forcefully that any amendment to the motion under the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 would make it impossible for the Government to ratify the treaty. If the Prime Minister supports those amendments tomorrow, she will be arguing that she should not be allowed to ratify the treaty. Surely that cannot be right. Surely it is time that she came clean and decided that we will either vote in favour or against the deal tomorrow.

The Prime Minister: Nobody yet knows what amendments the Speaker will choose for voting on tomorrow. As for the ratification of the treaty as in the withdrawal agreement Bill when that comes through, the Bill will obviously need to reflect what is in the withdrawal agreement. A number of issues have been raised by hon. Members across the House—not just the ones to which the hon. Gentleman referred, but also issues around workers' rights—on which we have the ability to give further confidence to Members in a way that does not actually have an impact on the ratification of the treaty.

Chris Bryant: It does.

The Prime Minister: No, it doesn't.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Whatever option people want for the future relationship, other than actually remaining in the EU, there will need to be some sort of agreement with the European Union on money and citizens' rights and some guarantees around the Northern Ireland border. Does the Prime Minister agree that just kicking the can down the road, as some Opposition Members want, will not change any of those issues?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Any agreement will contain those elements, and we have those elements in the deal before us. The suggestion that all we need to do is somehow take longer and longer is not right, and the British people would turn around and say, "Three years on, we need to leave."

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In December 2017, in response to a question from me, the Prime Minister said that Northern Ireland would never be treated differently in relation to the single market and the customs union. I welcomed that reply—and today the Prime Minister has referred to herself as a "proud Unionist"—but the withdrawal agreement has changed it and Northern Ireland will be treated very differently from the rest of the United Kingdom. The Unionism that the Prime Minister is putting forward has been weakened. Will she reiterate the Unionism of December 2017 and not her watered down and false version of January 2019?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman will have noted, we published a document last week in relation to Northern Ireland that confirms the commitments we have given on one of the issues of concern that he and his hon. and right hon. Friends have raised about the potential differences in regulation between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. We are clear about the commitments we would give in relation to that situation, such that we do not see that difference occurring should the backstop be put in place. I believe firmly in the Union of the United Kingdom, and I want to do everything to ensure that we maintain the Union of the United Kingdom. There are of course already some differences in the treatment of Northern Ireland in relation to some laws, and some of those differences are significant in the areas in which they operate, but we have given a commitment to ensuring we do not have that divergence in future.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I am very appreciative of the Prime Minister's seemingly tireless efforts in negotiating the withdrawal agreement, but is it not the case that, because we could not unilaterally leave the backstop if it were to come into force, we are effectively ceding sovereignty, not taking back control?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that there is no unilateral right to exit that mechanism. There is, of course, a termination mechanism within the withdrawal agreement and the protocol, but both sides would need to agree because of the fundamental point of ensuring that, at every stage, there is the guarantee of no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. The backstop need not come into force if the future relationship is put in place by the end of December 2020. Even if there were a need for something at that stage, it would be possible for this Parliament—we have been clear that it would be for this Parliament—to choose whether to go down the route of extending the implementation period instead. I believe that the best thing for us to do is to work to ensure that the future relationship comes into place, with a long-term and sustainable guarantee of no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): The Prime Minister has just informed the House that she and her party accepted and respected the vote of the Welsh referendum

on devolution in 1997. If that is the case, why did the 2005 Tory manifesto call for a further referendum on Welsh devolution, including an option to abolish the Welsh Assembly?

The Prime Minister: We accepted the vote on Welsh devolution, and we accepted devolution. Of course, we looked beyond that to extending the powers of the Welsh Assembly, and this Government have extended the powers of the Welsh Assembly.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that any failure of this House to comply with the instruction of the people to take this country out of the European Union in an orderly way will play right into the hands of those who wish to destroy our precious Union and break up our United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. People want to see us leaving the European Union in an orderly, smooth way that does not disrupt people's jobs and livelihoods. To do it in any other way would, indeed, be a threat to the Union of the United Kingdom.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Following on from my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), over the weekend we have seen a very disturbing increase in threats of violence against colleagues. Does the Prime Minister agree it is important that we are all mindful of our language, particularly when discussing parliamentary procedures and no deal and its consequences? Otherwise we are at risk of widening the divisions we have worked so hard to close, enabling a space in which the far right and its followers can step in.

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree that there is no place for these kinds of threats, and for the abuse and harassment that has, sadly, been taking place. Members of this House, and indeed members of the public, should be able to hold different opinions, and hold them passionately, and debate them with passion and vigour, without the threat of physical violence and the sort of harassment and bullying that has happened online.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): The Prime Minister has said that the assurances she has from the EU would give legal certainty and clarity. If there is a dispute in that matter in relation to what is in the withdrawal agreement, who will be the final arbiter on it? Will that go to article 174, with the European Court of Justice to look at European law? Who will be the arbiter on that?

The Prime Minister: The arbiter would be the arbitration panel; a process of governance is set out in the arrangements that we have set out in the withdrawal agreement and, looking ahead, for the future relationship under the political declaration.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): It has been reported that Ireland has gained more than 5,000 jobs, including one assumes those created by a move by the firm set up by the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) because of what the firm calls "considerable uncertainty" and increased costs due to Brexit.

Does the Prime Minister agree that this is all the proof needed to show why Scotland's best interests lie in being an independent member state of the EU?

The Prime Minister: Scotland's best economic interests—I suggest the hon. Gentleman looks at the figures—are met by remaining a member of the UK.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Given today's joint letter to the Prime Minister from Presidents Juncker and Tusk saying that the EU is

"not in a position to agree to anything that changes or is inconsistent with the Withdrawal Agreement",

is it not the case that the Prime Minister has achieved nothing since pulling the meaningful vote on 10 December? In her own words, "nothing has changed".

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier in response to a number of hon. Members, the concern that was expressed was about ensuring—[*Interruption.*] I am trying to answer the hon. Lady's question. The concern people had within the House, overwhelmingly, was one of ensuring that the backstop would be temporary if it ever came into place. That is in the withdrawal agreement already, but the further assurances that we have received further confirm that. As I have said, the December Council conclusions do have legal force.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): In a speech on 11 October last year, Michel Barnier stated that in the event of no deal there would be checks at the border for all live animals and products of animal origin. Is that not potentially disastrous for Northern Ireland and for the integrity of the UK?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right; some have felt that the EU would not require such checks, but the EU has been clear that it would require checks in the circumstances of no deal.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I admire the Prime Minister's efforts to contort her deal over the backstop to try to get it over the line and passed, but surely she must now be stepping back and looking at the bigger picture, which is that her deal and any version of it is still a betrayal of what people voted for. Her deal is not what people voted for in 2016. So much has changed, and it is time to go back to them with the truth now and ask them for their view.

The Prime Minister: I believe that what people voted for in 2016 was to ensure that the ECJ jurisdiction ended in the UK—the deal delivers that; that free movement would come to an end—the deal delivers that; and that we did not continue sending significant sums to the EU every year—and the deal delivers on that.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Should not anyone in any party who purports to be concerned about having a positive future with the EU, preserving our Union with Scotland and protecting our Union with Northern Ireland now stop playing politics and vote for my right hon. Friend's deal, because a failure to do so is going to let genies out of bottles that are best kept corked?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend that it is important that people support this deal, because it delivers on the referendum, protects the Union and protects jobs and security.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): All but 4% of Hull North constituents who have contacted me have asked me to vote down the Prime Minister's deal—and that includes many leavers. Does the Prime Minister think that is because they no longer support Brexit, or because they want the promises made during the leave campaign to be delivered and her deal does not do that?

The Prime Minister: There was obviously a vigorous referendum campaign. As I said earlier, I believe that when people voted, they voted to take back control of money, laws and borders. That is what this deal delivers, alongside the other things that people were concerned about, such as leaving the CAP and the CFP and having an independent trade policy.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): *The Sunday Times* was in Boston on Saturday to take the temperature of the most heavily leave-voting town in the country. In a genuinely random sampling of people in the marketplace, it heard that my constituents understood that the wind was in the sails of those who want to stop Brexit. I cannot pretend that I was overwhelmed with love for the Prime Minister's deal, but people in the marketplace said that it was either back this deal or see no Brexit, and that would be anathema to British democracy.

The Prime Minister: I am interested in the views that were expressed in Boston at the weekend. I agree with my hon. Friend, and it is absolutely right that the Government deliver on the vote of the British people. People are becoming increasingly concerned about the possibility of there being attempts to try to thwart, frustrate or, indeed, stop that Brexit.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The complexity of these islands is summed up in the Good Friday agreement, which allows and recognises the diversity of identity. On 22 October, the Prime Minister assured me, on the Floor of the House, that the right to be both British, Irish or both is secure, yet today those who seek to retain their Irish identity are having to officially renounce a British identity that they never had, at a cost of £372, and are having their freedom of movement limited for up to six months, and citizens in Northern Ireland are even having their residency questioned. Can the Prime Minister assure me, and people like Emma DeSouza and those of a Northern Irish background in my constituency, that the Prime Minister's Government are not using Brexit to undermine the fundamentals and complexities of the benefits of the Good Friday agreement?

The Prime Minister: We are indeed ensuring that the Brexit arrangements that we have negotiated with the European Union abide by the commitments in the Belfast Good Friday agreement. As was indicated in the December joint report, it is very clear in the withdrawal agreement that the point of nationality raised by the hon. Gentleman is referenced, and it is clear that the ability of people in Northern Ireland to identify as British or Irish is in there.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): I have sat through the entirety of the exchanges on this statement, and those on many before it, and I commend the Prime Minister for keeping her temper and for the polite way in which she has answered every question when it must sometimes be infuriating for her to do so. Will she just reassure me that if things do not go quite to plan tomorrow, she will still apply the fantastic British grit she has shown to how we leave under WTO rules?

The Prime Minister: I am of course working to ensure that things do go in the right way tomorrow, but I assure my hon. Friend that whatever I do and whatever happens, I will be working in the national interest with the determination, which I have always had, of ensuring that we deliver for this country.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Small businesses with no time, energy or resources for no-deal planning are appalled to see the phantom ferry company's Government contract, the Kent lorry park experiment and the swathes of civil servants now given over to some sort of "Dad's Army"-style wargaming of troops on our streets, so will the Prime Minister tell us how much, by running down the clock and not ruling out no deal, her blackmail Brexit has cost the taxpayer to date and since 11 December?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady will know the sums of money that have been made available by the Treasury to Departments across Government to provide for both no-deal preparations and the preparations for a deal. It is entirely right that we make those contingency arrangements to ensure that we have made the decisions and put in place the operations necessary should there be no deal.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that all deals would require a backstop of some sort? As unpalatable as this deal and the backstop are, there is simply no such thing as a painless, risk-free backstop. If it was not this backstop, another backstop would be required, and it would perhaps be as dangerous as, or more concerning than, this one.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is clear that whatever agreement was reached with the European Union, a backstop would be required. Some people talk about a different trade agreement for the future, but a backstop would still be necessary, because a negotiation would be required to ensure that a backstop was there for circumstances in which that new agreement could not come into place at the end of the implementation period. There is no agreement without a backstop.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): A survey by Harvard researchers of 120 small and medium-sized enterprises and stakeholders concluded that for most companies

"the May deal is inferior to remaining in the EU or...a much closer relationship with the EU that includes continued participation in the Single Market".

We still respect experts in Scotland. When will the Prime Minister follow their advice, fulfil the people of Scotland's vote in the EU referendum, and protect our place in the single market and the customs union?

The Prime Minister: What we have negotiated with the European Union—what is set out in the political declaration—is the most ambitious trade relationship with any third country that the EU has ever negotiated. It is one with a good customs arrangement and good access to market. The protection of jobs was one of the things that I wanted to ensure we achieved in the deal that we negotiated, and it does just that.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for meeting a group of MPs from all parties with manufacturing in their constituencies last week. Given the assurances that have now come forward from the EU, and bearing in mind that the overwhelming message from that meeting was that manufacturing businesses do not want a no-deal situation, which would be highly disruptive—that message came from both sides of industry in the meeting—does she agree that voting for the deal is the way forward?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right that it was clear in that meeting that a number of Members from both sides of the House, in conversation and discussion with the manufacturing industry, recognised the importance of ensuring that we protected jobs, and the potential impact that no deal could have on those jobs. I believe that it is a good deal because it delivers on the referendum, but protects jobs.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Will the Prime Minister confirm that, despite today's letters, the legal position remains that the UK cannot enter into the extension period without the explicit agreement of the European Union; that we cannot avoid going into the backstop unless we have the explicit agreement of the European Union on an alternative; and that once we are in the backstop, we cannot legally withdraw from it without the explicit agreement of the European Union?

The Prime Minister: As I have said to Members when they have referred specifically to the last of those points, there is no unilateral withdrawal mechanism. The United Kingdom can make the choice, and we are clear that Northern Ireland—Stormont—should have a voice in that choice, as to whether to go into the backstop or the implementation period. The reason why a unilateral exit mechanism is not there is that the European Union has a concern that the United Kingdom—we are clear that we would not do this—might use such a mechanism to put Northern Ireland and Ireland in a situation where there was a hard border.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The Prime Minister clearly cannot get her deal through tomorrow night—the Foreign Secretary conceded as much last week—despite the false choice we are being offered. Meanwhile, the Leader of the Opposition wants to call an election in the hope, like Micawber, that something will turn up. It gives me no pleasure to say that I am beginning to think that, given how things are going, perhaps we all might as well wait to see whether a mermaid riding a unicorn will happen by and provide a solution. Does the Prime Minister not think that a sensible way forward would be, at long last and finally, to listen to the majority of the Scottish people, and reject Brexit and this entire shambles once and for all?

The Prime Minister: The sensible way forward is to deliver on Brexit for the British people and to do so with the deal that has been negotiated with the EU.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister received a letter that I and many other colleagues across the parties in this House signed warning against the impact of a no-deal Brexit on our industries, particularly our manufacturing industries, that rely on very sensitive supply chains across the European continent. Faced with this dilemma tomorrow night of a deal that is dead in the water or a default to a no-deal situation, it is clear that the Prime Minister cannot in all conscience entertain any scenario in which no deal is a possibility. Is it not her duty now to rule out, once and for all, no deal under any circumstances, as it is not in the national interest? She should not countenance it under any circumstances.

The Prime Minister: I am not asking Parliament to vote for no deal; I am asking Parliament to vote for the deal that ensures that we avoid no deal.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): The Prime Minister has agreed the backstop as an insurance policy. Insurance policies usually protect but, according to her own MPs, this one leaves the UK vulnerable. Prime Minister, no one would even take out a car insurance policy that would leave them vulnerable, so whose insurance is it, and has she agreed to pay for the other driver's policy?

The Prime Minister: The point of the backstop as an insurance policy is that it is a guarantee that, in all the circumstances that have been set out, there will be no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, so it is a guarantee for people in Northern Ireland and for people in Ireland. I have been clear that the United Kingdom Government would not erect a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland but, as I have indicated and as has been clear from a number of questions today, the European Commission is also clear that, in a no-deal scenario, checks at the border would be expected.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Prime Minister, at the eleventh hour, you decided to contact the trade unions of Great Britain that represent the workers who create the wealth of this country. Did you get a good response?

The Prime Minister: I had positive discussions with trade union leaders and a positive discussion with the chairman of the CBI.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Prime Minister has said that these written assurances have legal standing and legal force, and that they will be taken into account, but she has also acknowledged that paragraph 2 of the Attorney General's letter of advice says that they do not "alter the fundamental meanings" of the provisions of the withdrawal agreement. Can she confirm that, ultimately, as a matter of law, in any conflict between the wording of these assurances and the wording of the withdrawal agreement, the withdrawal agreement would triumph, and that therefore, in the months since she pulled the meaningful vote, nothing has changed?

The Prime Minister: The hon. and learned Lady says that it is my claim that these assurances have legal force. Obviously it is the European Union that has been clear that they have legal force and, as she has said, the Attorney General himself has said that they would have “legal force in international law and thus be relevant and cognisable in the interpretation of the Withdrawal Agreement.”

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister referred to the “subversion of our democracy”. In our parliamentary democracy, no Parliament can bind its successor. It was not this Parliament that agreed to hold a referendum or to prematurely trigger article 50, but the previous Parliament. If she is talking about subversion of democracy, was her calling of the general election that she lost in 2017 a subversion of democracy?

The Prime Minister: May I gently point out to the hon. Gentleman that, actually, the Conservative party is in government in this country and we will deliver on the referendum of 2016?

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): This Prime Minister and this Government have been engaging in acts of outright fuddery—the spreading of fear, uncertainty and doubt—with the bizarre spectacle of the Financial Secretary to the Treasury running up and down with planted notes saying, “No food” and “No channel tunnel”. Is it no surprise to the Prime Minister that people in Scotland, as they watch this ridiculous spectacle, are starting to think that we could do a lot better running things ourselves?

The Prime Minister: It is entirely right that we are taking those mitigation measures in relation to no deal to ensure that we can deal with that consequence should that be the situation in which we find ourselves. I say to the hon. Lady that she and a number of her colleagues, including the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), the leader of the SNP in Westminster, talk about listening to the voice of the people, but listening to the voice of the people means accepting the result of the 2014 Scottish referendum.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): May I press the Prime Minister on the tone of the debate and ask what action is being taken by leaders of all different opinions on Brexit to ensure that a sense of people versus parliamentarians is not encouraged?

The Prime Minister: It is in the hands of all of us in this House to show that we are respecting the vote of the people, that we are respecting the views that people gave in 2016, and that the debate is about how we deliver on that vote. That is very important for everybody across the whole House.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): If regulatory alignment is good enough for Northern Ireland, it is good enough for Wales, good enough for Scotland and good enough for England. For that reason, I will be voting against the Prime Minister’s deal tomorrow, because we want a level playing field in the United Kingdom. Moreover, 88% of constituents who have contacted me reject her deal. Many young people—75%—think that they will be worse off with Brexit. Now that she has been exposed as having form in voting against the will of the Welsh

people in the election and standing on a manifesto to overturn it, can she, at this eleventh hour, give the people a vote and a final say on Brexit?

The Prime Minister: The people were given a vote. They were given a vote by Parliament—Parliament agreed. The Government of the time said that that decision would be respected, and I believe that we should do so.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): May I plead with the Prime Minister to mind her language? She used a term in her statement to say that people’s opinions would represent a “subversion of our democracy”, which is completely unnecessary at a time when there is far too much inflammatory language about already. She holds the office of Prime Minister. She is describing the views of Members of this House, including former members of her own Government, when she talks about a subversion of democracy. I genuinely appeal to her to consider her office when using language of that kind.

The Prime Minister: And I appeal to Members across the whole House that they consider the duty that we have to the British people to deliver on the vote that they gave in the referendum of 2016, and to accept that and not to try to find ways of frustrating or stopping Brexit.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I think that the Prime Minister owes this House a full and frank apology. While stealing 40 winks this morning after my 50th birthday celebrations at the weekend, I had to move train carriages just before Stoke-on-Trent to accommodate the Prime Minister and her entourage. I was forced to spend the rest of the journey with parliamentary colleagues and eminent BBC journalists. The point that I really wish to make is that, while this is a place of disagreement at the moment, the one thing on which I do agree with the Prime Minister is that she supports peace on the island of Ireland. No matter what tempests and storms we have over the next days and weeks, will she keep that as a priority and not be buffeted?

The Prime Minister: First, let me thank the hon. Gentleman for the note that he left in the train carriage when he moved places. Seriously, I say that it is absolutely the case that we have been clear throughout the negotiations with the European Union that we want to respect the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. The peace process has brought incredible benefits to the people of Northern Ireland. We want to maintain that peace process and we will not be doing anything that damages it.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): May I, from the Opposition Benches, also acknowledge the courtesy with which the Prime Minister has answered myriad questions?

Mr Speaker, if I could magic you and the Prime Minister to the beautiful Scottish highlands, I would show you infrastructure projects such as roads, harbours and airports that would not have happened had it not been for European money. That expenditure was incredibly important in reversing the depopulation that was the historical curse of the highlands. When I return to my

constituency at the end of this long week, what should my answer be when my constituents say to me, “Jamie, what will replace this money?”

The Prime Minister: We will be putting in place the shared prosperity fund, which will look at disparities that occur between nations of the United Kingdom, and within communities and regions of the United Kingdom. We will obviously consult on how the shared prosperity fund will operate, but it will ensure that this is a country that works for everyone.

Mr Speaker: I must say to the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) that his constituency always sounds an immensely agreeable place, and therefore I really must visit.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): After two and a half years of complete lack of direction, the Prime Minister wants us to vote for this agreement, which only puts everything into touch and into the transition period. Yet she is somehow trying to convince herself that, to avoid the backstop and avoid a hard border in Northern Ireland, within the next year and a half or so she can agree a trade deal, a customs deal and find from nowhere a technology solution—invented, trialled and implemented within that year and a half. Will she tell me the key milestone dates for this magic solution, and can she name one major IT infrastructure project delivered in such a timescale?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman talks about the direction over the past two and a half years. The Lancaster House speech, the Florence speech, the Munich speech, the Mansion House speech, the December 2017 joint report, the agreement in March last year of the arrangements for the implementation period, and now of course the political declaration and the withdrawal agreement—they set a very clear direction and it is a good direction for this country. It is a good deal for Scotland and for the whole UK.

Points of Order

6.11 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can you advise me whether there are any ways to remove the need for a money resolution for a Bill brought forward by a Back Bencher? Could you confirm that only the Government can move money resolutions?

Mr Speaker: That has long been the practice. I am not going to get involved in a detailed disquisition on these matters tonight as I think that would be premature and unnecessary. The hon. Gentleman has asked me a question and I have furnished him with an answer. I trust that satisfies him. If it does, good; but if it does not, never mind.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You may be aware of some speculation in the press, so could you confirm that a Committee of the whole House can only be chaired by the Chairman of Ways and Means?

Mr Speaker: The Standing Orders are perfectly clear. The hon. Gentleman need not ask me, either on his own initiative or at somebody else’s urging, a question to which the answer is readily available if he bothers to read the relevant material; it is pretty clear.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

This is a brave moment for me because I have never before made a point of order. I seek just a little bit of clarification regarding these so-called devices that have been much mentioned in the press over the weekend and that might give over control of the Order Paper—something that I would find deeply concerning. I would be very grateful if you gave some indication as to which other Members of Parliament you have had discussions with about these devices and their use. Is this normal procedure or am I just worrying about nothing?

Mr Speaker: Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear; people do seem a bit confused, but I will certainly try to help the hon. Lady. First, to the best of my knowledge and recollection I have not had any meetings or, as she puts it, discussions about such matters. I see a certain amount of speculation in the press but I am not aware of, or in any way party to or involved with, any such proposals. Secondly—I would have thought that the hon. Lady would know this after nearly four years in the House but perhaps she is not aware of it—more generally I regularly see Members from across the House upon a range of matters if they ask to see me. There is nothing odd or unusual about that; there is nothing without precedent. On the first point that she raised, the fact that there might be speculation about matters that causes perplexity or befuddles some people may be a concern for them, but it is not the responsibility of the Chair. I hope that I have given her a clear and explicit answer which brooks of no misunderstanding.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Prime Minister responded to my question earlier by saying:

[Liz Saville Roberts]

“We accepted the result of the referendum vote in Wales... We made clear at the time that we respected the result of that referendum in Wales.”

However, her actions and the actions of her party at the time and since then are on record, and they contradict these assertions. I fear that the Prime Minister has misled the House on this matter in responding to myself and other Members. How might she correct the record?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. I am sure that if she is suggesting what she has just suggested, she would wish to insert the word “inadvertently”, because she is a person of impeccable manners and I am sure that she would not suggest for one moment that the Prime Minister had deliberately misled the House. I just seek that assurance; is the hon. Lady suggesting that it was inadvertent?

Liz Saville Roberts: I am content to apologise and to insert the word “inadvertently”.

Mr Speaker: I was not requesting an apology, although it is very gracious of her to proffer it. I just wanted to hear the insertion of the word “inadvertently”. The answer is that, in a sense, the hon. Lady has partially found salvation in the matter by raising the point of order and putting the factual position as she sees it on the record. In terms of further redress, my response is that every Member of this House, including the Prime Minister, is responsible for the veracity of what she or he says. In the event that a Member believes that he or she has made an error, it is incumbent upon that Member to put the record straight. Knowing the commitment to this Chamber of the hon. Lady and her regular presence at statements and other opportunities to interrogate Ministers, I am sure that she can seek a correction in direct exchange with the Prime Minister at the material time.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. We have seen some changes in precedent in recent days; indeed, you rightly said that precedent can be changed. If there were to be an amendment to the Business of the House motion preventing the Government from controlling the Order Paper, it would be—as I understand it from much more long-standing colleagues—a matter of precedent. What role might the Liaison Committee play in that decision?

Mr Speaker: I am not a member of the Liaison Committee. I will look at the situation on a case-by-case basis. If the circumstance arises, I shall make an appropriate judgment. I think we should leave it there. May I very gently say to the hon. Lady that the late Lord Whitelaw was so shrewd when he said that he personally preferred to cross bridges only when he came to them?

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In my 17 years in the House, including two years as a Government Whip, I found out one thing, which is that if Members act as a Whip’s lickspittle, they get very little respect from other Members of the House—even, ultimately, from their own Whips.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has made his own point in his own way with considerable force and alacrity. I am not going to accuse anybody of being—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): It’s not a point of order, is it?

Mr Speaker: Well, it will just extend the proceedings if people chunter from a sedentary position ineloquently and for no obvious benefit or purpose. It is a point of order and I am responding to it. If the junior Minister on the Treasury Bench does not like the fact that I am responding to it, he can lump it, because I am going to respond to it in my way and in the fashion that I choose. His approval or disapproval is a matter of staggering irrelevance as far as I am concerned. I certainly would not accuse anybody of being a lickspittle, but I think the record shows that when I was a serving Back Bencher—and, for that matter, often as a Front Bencher—I was not overly preoccupied with the views of my Whips.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. There has been a lot of speculation—not from you, but from other MPs in the House—about the ability of a Back Bencher to influence the Business of the House motion and take control of business on a specified day. As a Back Bencher, I seek your guidance as to whether any procedural device currently exists or whether a precedent will be set so that such a device can exist going forward.

Mr Speaker: I refer the hon. Gentleman to answers that I provided earlier. I am very happy to look at these matters in the round; there may well be discussions to be had about them in subsequent days. It is perfectly legitimate for the hon. Gentleman to seek to engage me on the matter, but I do not think that in this context there is any particular merit in repeating that which has already been said. I therefore urge him to consult the *Official Report*, and I hope that he will find it productive when he does.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This is relevant, because I know that members of the public and members of the press are asking about it; indeed, I have just been asked. Is it your understanding that if article 50 were to be extended, that could happen only if a Government Minister were to move a motion asking for it to happen? If that has changed, then it is a massive change to our entire democracy.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady raises an interesting point, but it does not appertain to the consideration that is before us today. I am certainly happy to reflect—[*Interruption.*] Well, she has asked me a question, very courteously I am sure, and I shall courteously reply. I do not think that the point of order is immediately relevant to the matter that we are debating today. If people want to offer opinions on the subject in the course of the debate, they can. We shall see what unfolds in subsequent days. [*Interruption.*] I do not know what will unfold. If some people think they are psychic and know what the result will be tomorrow, that is a matter for them.

Vicky Ford *rose*—

Mr Speaker: No, no: I am not taking any further point of order from the hon. Lady. She has raised the issue. I have given the holding response that I have given. [HON. MEMBERS: “Ah!”] I am not giving a verdict on this matter. I am not anticipating any such scenario.

I have not been approached about any such scenario. No Member of Parliament has posited any such scenario. So when people say, “Ah!”, as though something frightfully revealing has been said, I am sorry to disappoint them, but it has not. Nothing of any great significance has been said. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) is very courteous, but I am untroubled by these matters.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have been here for nine years, and I think the whole House knows that I am not entirely a Whips’ lickspittle. May I just ask for a point of clarification? My recollection is that a statutory instrument tends to be moved by a Minister of the Crown, for the very simple reason that legislation provides for that to be the case. Could you confirm that my recollection is correct?

Mr Speaker: Yes, that has always been the case, and I am not aware that there is any imminent or likely prospect of it being changed. I am not party to any such proposal. Nobody has posited to me a scenario in which I would be expected to agree to any such change. That is the reality. The position that I have set out at present is perfectly clear. The hon. Gentleman, for whom I have the highest regard, is perfectly entitled to ask me whether I understand, with reference to that which has transpired to date, his interpretation of proceedings to be correct. I do.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. First, I am proud to have friends in the Whips Office—and right across the House. I seek your guidance relating to the speculation in the press this weekend, because it is important and concerning. I believe that it is a very important principle in this place that we are all equal, and that means equal knowledge, access to information and knowledge about procedures. If, as has been speculated, there are likely to be changes in procedures, can I implore you, Mr Speaker, to make sure that equal and fair treatment is considered, and that we are all aware of any changes in policies and procedures to make sure that there is not asymmetry of information, or advantage or disadvantage given to one Member of this House over another?

Mr Speaker: I am happy to assure the hon. Gentleman that, as has been my unflinching practice since 22 June 2009, I am always equally open to hearing from, and then, as best I can, responding to any Member of the House of Commons who approaches me.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con) *indicated assent.*

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), who is nodding vigorously in assent to that proposition from a sedentary position. The right hon. Gentleman and I have known each other for well over 20 years, and he knows that I am utterly and scrupulously fair-minded in these matters. I have been, I am, and I always will be. I am not responsible for what other

people might be talking about. I do not plant stories in the newspapers. That is a black art perhaps practised by other people from time to time. It is not something that greatly concerns me. I do not get very excited about it. The hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) is entirely entitled to seek the assurance of equality of treatment.

Let me just say one further thing in the light of some press reports. People really ought to understand, because it is incredibly simple, straightforward and uncontroversial, that any hon. or right hon. Member of this House who wishes to come to see the Speaker about something that concerns him or her can ask to do so, and diary permitting and subject to agreement on suitable dates, that would always happen. The notion that some particular advantage is given to a specified individual, or a little coterie, as part of a secret plot in private apartments is so staggeringly absurd that I would not expect for one moment that someone of the intelligence and perspicacity of the hon. Gentleman would give it credence for so much as a single second. I hope that is helpful to him.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I mentioned during the statement that *The Sunday Times* was in my constituency taking its temperature. I should say that my constituents did raise your role as well as the role of the Government, and so I would perhaps say gently, in response to your earlier comment, that there is some doubt out there among the public. The question they asked me to ask you was this. You changed some precedents last week, and some of them wanted to know if you expected to change any more.

Mr Speaker: As I have already indicated, I made a judgment last week. I look at issues on a case-by-case basis, which is a perfectly reasonable thing to do. I know the hon. Gentleman will understand if I say that as someone who has been the guardian of the rights of this House for the last nine and a half years, I am confident and comfortable that others recognise my commitment to fairness in this Chamber. I have a high regard for the parliamentary commitment of the hon. Gentleman. I have no intention—and I do not refer to him in this context—of taking lectures on doing right by Parliament from people who have been conspicuous in denial of, and sometimes contempt for it. I will stand up for the rights of the House of Commons, and I will not be pushed around by agents of the Executive branch. They can be as rude as they like. They can be as intimidating as they like. They can spread as much misinformation as they like. It will not make the slightest bit of difference to my continuing and absolute determination to serve the House of Commons. Unlike some people in important positions, who of course are elected constituency Members but have not been elected to their offices here, I have been elected, re-elected, re-elected and re-elected as Speaker to do the right thing by the House of Commons. That is what I have done, that is what I am doing, and that is what I will go on doing. That is so crystal clear that I feel sure it will satisfy the hon. Gentleman.

European Union (Withdrawal) Act

[8TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Debate resumed (Orders, 4 December and 9 January).

Question again proposed,

That this House approves for the purposes of section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, the negotiated withdrawal agreement laid before the House on Monday 26 November 2018 with the title ‘Agreement on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community’ and the framework for the future relationship laid before the House on Monday 26 November 2018 with the title ‘Political Declaration setting out the framework for the future relationship between the European Union and the United Kingdom’.

6.27 pm

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): As we take this debate into the early hours of tomorrow morning, I hope that we will be able to replicate the good humour, good manners and resilience that the Prime Minister showed during her two hours in front of the House this afternoon. [*Interruption.*] Yes, Mr Speaker, I understand that. As a doctor, I admire good bladder control.

Mr Speaker: I am able to stay in the House for many, many hours. We are not talking about two hours, for the avoidance of doubt. I will very happily be here for 12 hours, if necessary, because I take my responsibilities to the House of Commons seriously.

Dr Fox: It is a pleasure to open this debate on global Britain and the economy as we consider how to honour the decision made by the British people, in a democratic referendum, to leave the European Union. When Parliament made the decision to hold the referendum, it made a contract with the British people that said, “We are unable, or unwilling, to make a decision on this constitutional relationship. This will be decided by the British people and Parliament will abide by that decision.” We have a duty to honour our side of that contract, whether we ourselves voted to remain or leave in the referendum. When we, as Members of Parliament, voted in that referendum, we did so in the knowledge that our vote carried an equal weight to that of other citizens of our country. For Parliament to attempt in any way to thwart or block Brexit by any means would be an act of vanity and self-indulgence that would create a breach of trust between Parliament and the people, with potentially unknowable consequences.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is raising an important point about the obligation of Members of Parliament as a result of the referendum, but we have also had a general election since that day. That general election could have given the Government an overwhelming majority, which would have seen Brexit move one way, but it did not; it ended up with a very tight House. As a result, we have a Prime Minister who could have sought to bring all of us along with her, but instead seems to have taken a very tribal view. What advice has the right hon. Gentleman given to the Prime Minister?

Dr Fox: The advice I will give to the hon. Gentleman is this. The point was raised in the previous Session that no House can bind its successor, but 80% of Members

of this House were elected on a manifesto that said they would honour the result of the referendum. We have a duty to do so if we are to keep faith with our voters.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con) rose—

Dr Fox: I will give way to my hon. Friend, and then I will give way on a number of occasions later on.

Henry Smith: Is it not also the case that the Government spent more than £9 million of taxpayers’ money on a leaflet to every UK household saying that the decision of the British people would be respected, so the claim that people did not know what they were voting for or what the outcome would be is nonsense?

Dr Fox: The very act of spending that £9 million, given the outcome of the referendum, shows quite how easy it is to waste Government money.

It is clear that there are three possible outcomes to our deliberations.

Albert Owen: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I do not make points of order lightly, as you know. The Prime Minister was asked a question earlier about respecting the will of the people and referendums. A number of Members—including, I think, the Secretary of State—voted against the Government of Wales Act 1998 after the 1997 referendum decided the matter. That should be on the record when he lectures us about Brexit.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has put his point on the record, and it is there for people to observe if they wish.

Dr Fox: The hon. Gentleman confirms my wisdom in not giving way to him.

It is clear that there are three possible outcomes to our deliberations. I want to say at the outset that Members will determine which route they choose, and while we may disagree, I do not doubt either their motives or their patriotism as they choose the course available to this country. The first option is to accept the deal that has been negotiated—and there is no other deal available. The second is to leave the European Union with no deal, and the third is to have no Brexit at all. Before considering the implications of those options, it is important to underline the fundamental strengths that underpin the UK economy, the changing patterns of our trade and the future patterns of global trade.

Several hon. Members rose—

Dr Fox: I will give way in a moment.

The UK has an excellent economic success story to tell. Since a Conservative-led Government came to power in 2010, exports have grown by 38.1%, at around 6% per year, driven by an increase in services exports of 54.8%. We sold some £618 billion-worth of goods and services in 2017, up 10.9% on the previous year. New figures released last week by the Office for National Statistics revealed that exports of goods and services in the year to November 2018 were worth £630 billion, growing by £13.9 billion since the previous year. There have now been 32 consecutive months of exports growth.

As the UK considers future free trade agreements with the likes of the United States, Australia, New Zealand and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership countries, goods exports to those countries continued to boom. To the USA, they were up to £54.9 billion; to Australia, up to £5.1 billion; to New Zealand, up to £869 million; and to CPTPP countries, up to £28.4 billion. There was other notable goods exports growth to non-EU markets—up 29.2% to Nigeria, up 27.3% to India, and up 18.5% to Thailand. That news comes as London retained its position as the top tech investment destination in Europe earlier this week. According to PitchBook and London & Partners, the capital received £1.8 billion-worth of tech investment in 2018—more than Berlin and Paris combined. So much for the failure that would result from a vote to leave the European Union.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Is not the key prize of leaving the EU that this country will be able to do trade deals around the world? If we adopted the advice of the Labour party, which is not to leave the EU in any meaningful way, we would not be able to do any trade deals across the globe.

Dr Fox: I will come to the specifics of the freedom to negotiate free trade agreements and the Opposition's policy on that. The point I was making was that when we voted to leave the European Union, we were told that the very act of voting to leave would result in massive job losses, a loss of investment in the United Kingdom, a collapse in confidence and a recession in the UK economy. Nothing could be further from the truth. We have created jobs. We have seen record inward investment, and we have seen our exports rise to record levels.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Secretary of State said that there were three possible outcomes to our deliberations. Actually, the three possible outcomes to our deliberations today and tomorrow are: first, that the package is agreed; secondly, that the package falls; and thirdly, that the package is amended. The former Brexit Secretary—the middle one—told the Procedure Committee, on legal advice:

“if amendments were passed which purported to offer approval, but only subject to changes being made to the text of either the Withdrawal Agreement or the Future Framework, this would, in effect, amount to Parliament not approving the documents that were put to it. In this circumstance, the Government would therefore not have the authority to ratify the Withdrawal Agreement.”

Does the Secretary of State agree that, if any amendment is carried tomorrow, it will not be possible for the Government to ratify the withdrawal agreement?

Dr Fox: As you well know, Mr Speaker, it depends what any amendment says, but the Government will seek to get approval for this agreement because there is no other agreement currently on offer from the European Union.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): I have a lot of admiration for my right hon. Friend. He is a much more experienced Member of Parliament than me and has been in this place for a long time. Could he explain to me how we would have no Brexit at all? As I understand it, and as many people are saying, even if the withdrawal agreement falls, the date of 29 March is in the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018.

Dr Fox: As the law stands, were there to be no changes, we would automatically leave the European Union on 29 March. If that piece of legislation was, however, changed by one means or another, the picture could be very different.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way, particularly as when we stood on our manifesto in 1997, our manifesto was so clearly against Welsh devolution. Does he agree that companies such as GE Healthcare, which is headquartered in my constituency and has just spent £12 million investing in the local economy, are right when they say that ratification of the withdrawal agreement would provide business with the certainty it needs? In contrast, an exit on no deal would present considerable challenges for their operations, supply chains and, most importantly, their customers.

Dr Fox: As usual, my right hon. Friend makes her point concisely. The argument has come from a wide range of business sectors that, while they can price in risk, they cannot price in uncertainty, and certainty is what they are looking for.

It is a matter of fact that the relative importance of the European Union as an export market for the United Kingdom has been declining over the last decade, falling from 48.9% of the total in 2010 to 45.2% in 2017. Of course, the importance of the UK to EU trade varies from country to country. Figures compiled by Japanese investment bank Nomura show that Belgium's economy is the most reliant on trade with the UK, with around 8% of Belgian GDP dependent on trade with Britain. That is the highest level within the EU27. Belgium exports over £30 billion-worth of goods to the UK, which is Belgium's fourth largest export market. Belgium's Finance Minister has previously called for a quick trade agreement with the United Kingdom post-Brexit to protect thousands of jobs in that country. When trade is looked at purely in terms of exports, Ireland is the most exposed country—about 13% of all Irish exports end up in Britain—and the Netherlands also has a large reliance on the UK for exports and GDP.

At the same time as the proportion of Britain's exports to the EU has fallen, we are trading more with other partners around the world. We export a huge variety of commodities—for example, we sold £22 billion-worth of food, feed and drink abroad in 2017. In the year to November 2018, we sold £33.7 billion-worth of cars, £25.2 billion of medicinal and pharmaceutical products, and £24.6 billion of mechanical power generator products—from aircraft engines to gas turbines, and from steam generators to nuclear reactors. So much for Britain not producing anything any more; we are actually experiencing a renaissance in manufacturing in this country.

We also export a great many services. We are, in fact, the world's second largest services exporter. In the year to September 2018, we sold some £82.4 billion-worth of business services, £61 billion of financial services and nearly £38 billion of travel services. Here, across the sectors, the UK has huge comparative advantage. Services account for almost half of all our exports—42.4% going to the EU and 57.6% to non-EU countries.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Dr Fox: I give way to the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), who was the first to stand up.

Seema Malhotra: The Secretary of State is making a very important point about our need to increase trade deals and trade relationships across the world. He has mentioned India, and on Friday I had a very good meeting with businesses in the Indian Business Network that are keen to increase trade with Britain. Does he agree with me that the relationship we have with the EU in trade is not just about our trade with the European Union? We use about 70 trade deals that the EU has negotiated with other countries for about £150 billion-worth of trade. Will the Secretary of State assure this House that there will still be access to those trade deals after we leave the European Union?

Dr Fox: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising a very important point. Yes, the Government's intention is, of course, that we will get this deal through, in which case, when it comes to an implementation period, we will have the opportunity for automatic roll-over. However, as the House would expect us to do, the Government are also preparing, in case there is no deal, to be able to have continuity of these trade agreements. A number of them are close to being signed, and when they are signed, the Government will put them to the House so that the House can make a judgment on them.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that when we leave the European Union we will be the biggest export market for EU goods? Probably something like 17% of all EU exports will be coming to us. Has he or his Department made any estimate of how many millions of jobs in the EU are reliant on this trade with the UK?

Dr Fox: That is why it is to our mutual advantage to get a free trade agreement with the European Union. I hear people say that it would be fine simply to leave purely on World Trade Organisation terms, but if WTO terms were so advantageous, we would not be looking to have a free trade agreement with the United States. It is very clear that free trade agreements are one of the ways in which we can overcome some of the restrictions on most favoured nation status. I imagine that it would be to the advantage of both parties—both the EU27 and the UK—to come to a free trade agreement of some form after we leave so that we can maximise that trade between us.

Lucy Powell: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Dr Fox: I will give way again in a little while.

World trade is at a pivotal moment. We are at the intersection of a series of major global trends—trends so seismic that they have transformed or will transform economies and societies across the world. Services are now a larger part of the world economy than ever before, and they are more easily traded across borders thanks to the internet and digital telecommunications. We live in an emerging knowledge transfer-based trading

system, where an engineering report, a 3D printer design, or new advances in machine learning can be just as valuable as the contents of a cargo container.

The transfer of services and expertise in things such as product design and software engineering are becoming ever more important. A revolution in e-commerce is now under way. It is already a major component of world trade—from some of the world's largest corporations, such as Alibaba and Amazon, to the thousands of small companies that have never before been able to trade internationally. Major new opportunities are arising in the rapidly developing commercial and consumer markets of south-east Asia, Africa and Latin America, and it is essential that Britain leverages its unique strengths to realise them.

Lucy Powell: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Dr Fox: I will give way to the hon. Lady, if only because of her patience and tenacity.

Lucy Powell: I thank the Secretary of State very much. Shortly after the referendum, when he first took up the post, he said that the day after we left the EU, which is now only a few weeks away, he would have dozens of trade deals ready to go. How is that going?

Dr Fox: Perhaps the hon. Lady was not listening to the answer I gave earlier, but that process is getting to the point where we are likely to be signing some of those agreements in the very near future, at which point we will put them to the House of Commons.

Not only has there been a revolution in e-commerce, but Britain's consumers have embraced it, with about 20% of all goods in the UK bought online. At the same time—this is less well known—of all goods sold online, the UK is third globally behind only China and the United States. Last year, one in seven global online shoppers bought UK goods. It is therefore essential that we are able to operate an independent trade policy, allowing us to access the EU market, which remains hugely important to us, without tying our hands in relation to our ability to access markets in some of the world's fastest-growing economies.

This deal enables us to develop a trade policy that will mean we can make the most of the opportunities of new technologies and the changing shape of the global economy, striking a balance between protecting the markets we already have and tapping into new and rapidly expanding markets elsewhere.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Specifically on e-commerce, the Government promised that in early 2019, the new online service for overseas businesses sending parcels to customers in the UK would be available. Will the Secretary of State tell us when it is going to be available?

Dr Fox: The Department for International Trade is putting increased resources into improving the elements we have to enable businesses to operate online, and we will continue to do so.

We must have a policy that is flexible and nimble, with which we can make the most of the opportunities of new technologies and the changing shape of the global economy. We can boost productivity, raise living standards and promote competitiveness. Working with

Parliament, business, civil society and the devolved Administrations, this deal allows us to have an independent trade policy for the first time in over 40 years.

Of course, we have not got everything that we want in this deal, but neither has the EU. There is give and take in any negotiation, and compromises have had to be made. Today, however, I would just like to emphasise what this agreement and the political declaration do. They give the United Kingdom the freedom to decide for ourselves who comes here, how to support our farmers and who fishes in our waters, as my right hon. Friend the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Secretary set out to the House the other day. They also give us the freedom to open up new markets to world-class British goods and services around the globe.

The political declaration sets out a clearly agreed vision for the UK's future relationship with the EU and provides instructions to negotiators. What the political declaration does is set out an unprecedented arrangement for UK-EU economic co-operation, provide ambitious arrangements for services and investment, and ensure that our relationship is far more comprehensive than any other free trade agreement the EU has signed to date.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): The Secretary of State has been a great champion for global Britain—or, as I would like to call it, global United Kingdom—but surely he must be disappointed by many elements of this withdrawal agreement, which ties our hands for the next number of years on the types of trade deals we can do. That situation is exacerbated and much greater in Northern Ireland, where we could, in the words of the Attorney General, be not permanently but almost indefinitely in a backstop that would prevent us from being part of a new UK trade deal situation.

Dr Fox: I will not go back over the ground that the Prime Minister went over extensively this afternoon, but I would say that we perhaps need to take cognisance of the wording of the letter that came from the two EU Presidents—of the Commission and of the Council. They have a very legalistic view, and when they say that something carries legal weight, it tends to do so. I share many of the reservations that many in this House have about the backstop, but I believe that the construction of the backstop and the relationship set out in the political declaration mean that the risk of getting to the backstop is much less than I fear the risk of our being unable to achieve Brexit is. For me, that has been one of the key political balances; Members across the House will have to make that decision for themselves.

The political declaration will enable both parties to deliver the legal agreements that will give the future relationship effect by the end of 2020, covering an economic partnership, but also a security partnership and specific agreements on cross-cutting co-operation.

There has been much speculation about what the alternative to the agreement is—that point was raised by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who is no longer in his place. Let me be clear: there is no alternative agreement to that which has already been negotiated. The EU and the UK have painstakingly thrashed out a deal that has been endorsed by our Prime Minister and the 27 leaders of the other EU member states. Failure to accept a negotiated deal will lead us, as I said earlier, to either no deal or, worse, no Brexit.

Toby Perkins: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way? [*Interruption.*]

Dr Fox: Why not? I will give way to the hon. Gentleman again. I am feeling extraordinarily generous.

Toby Perkins: I am grateful that the right hon. Gentleman could not find any better alternatives. Does he accept that the deal has been painstakingly negotiated on the basis of the red lines that the Prime Minister set out right at the start, and that if we had different red lines, we could end up at a different destination?

Dr Fox: The hon. Gentleman should not put himself down in that way; that is normally the business of those on the other side of the House.

It is clear that if we do not accept a negotiated deal, the two other outcomes would be no deal or potentially no Brexit, and I do not think that either of those are acceptable. The Government have been clear that we neither want nor expect a no-deal scenario, but of course the Government will continue to do the responsible thing and prepare for all eventualities in case a final agreement cannot be reached. However, the evidence is clear that the best way forward for our businesses, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) eloquently set out, and for jobs and for our collective prosperity, is to have a Brexit deal.

Some have suggested that it would be possible under article XXIV of the general agreement on tariffs and trade to maintain tariff-free trade as an alternative to the negotiated agreement in a no-deal scenario. There are two immediate problems facing that suggestion. The first is that it would require the agreement of the EU and be based on the expectation of a future trade agreement or customs union to be operable in WTO law. Although it might be argued, as I am sure many in the House would, that that would be in the economic interests of the EU27, we all know from experience that the politics of the EU can take precedence over economic pragmatism. In the political atmosphere of no deal, it would be difficult to cultivate the good will necessary for that to proceed. Secondly, that suggestion would not deal with all the regulatory issues—the non-tariff barriers—that are so important to many businesses.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that last week the Prime Minister met a group of Members from all parts of the House with manufacturing constituencies. There was concern coming through from all parts of the House and from both sides of industry that a no-deal situation would be disruptive and bad for manufacturing. Does he agree that, with the assurances that have come through today from the European Union, Members in all parts of the House who want to ensure that we avoid a no-deal situation could do a lot worse than vote for the deal that is on the table?

Dr Fox: I think that my right hon. and learned Friend, in making his points so succinctly, has just saved himself several hours of waiting. I believe that having a deal is preferable to no deal, but I am not one of those who takes the hyperbolic view that not having a deal would be cataclysmic to our economy. Yes, it may be disruptive, but it is entirely survivable for the

[Dr Fox]

UK economy. It is just not preferable, when it comes to the choice between having a deal and not having a deal, which is why I think it is advisable for the House to vote for this agreement.

There are, of course, Members of the House who want there to be no Brexit at all. I believe that would be a democratic disaster. It would be a betrayal of the commitments given by this House to respect the result of the EU referendum and, let me remind the 80% of the Members of the House who were elected on a promise to honour the result of the referendum, the manifesto commitments. There are many who say that democracy exists on the understanding that a voter can change their mind. That is undoubtedly true, but democratic consent by the people is also founded on the understanding that the result of the vote will be carried out. Failure to do so would undermine the trust of the people. Not only that, but it would be politically unacceptable, a betrayal of our principles and, potentially, a seismic and existential threat to our political system. We should not underestimate it. It would create a chasm of distrust between the electors and the elected of an unprecedented nature—a wilful destruction of the reputation of Parliament in the eyes of the people.

Boris Johnson (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his speech and particularly on his fortitude in his attitude towards a no-deal Brexit, which I think is entirely laudable. I know that he is a great admirer of the opportunities to increase our trade with the United States. Does he agree that it is a great sadness that the ambassador of the United States was forced to point out that, under this deal, we will be locked so closely into the EU customs union as to be unable to do a deep and thoroughgoing free trade deal with the United States, or indeed with any other significant economy?

Dr Fox: Our freedom to negotiate free trade agreements will be dependent on the level of alignment that we have. What is different about the political declaration, compared with the previous, Chequers proposals, is that there is no specific mention of a common rulebook or frictionless trade. Indeed, it sets out an ambition that we would determine the freedom that we would have by that level of alignment. We need to look, sector by sector, at what level of alignment we would want to have, in order to maximise our freedom. For example, there was a misunderstanding that the United Kingdom would not have control over tariffs on manufactured goods, which clearly we would have and which would be a very big ask in relation to, for example, the United States' automotive sector in any potential free trade agreement with the United Kingdom.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dr Fox: I will make some progress. I am cognisant of the fact that some 80 Members are down to speak in tonight's debate.

In coming to these deliberations, the House should also be under no illusion that the United Kingdom could somehow retain the status quo of its EU membership. This is not possible. It was not possible even before the referendum was called, because the EU itself is changing. The EU is committed, let us remember, to ever closer union.

Even since the referendum, there have been calls to move to qualified majority voting in areas from VAT to common foreign policy. These may indeed be right for those who wish to move towards greater integration, but they are not the right course for our country. Remaining in the European Union would be either to tie the United Kingdom into a more integrationist future or to create ever more tension and friction between ourselves and our European partners.

Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): Can the Secretary of State tell the House whether he believes that a deal with the United States would be one of the easiest in human history?

Dr Fox: No one who has ever done a negotiation with the United States would use the word “easy” to describe it. That is something that comes across rather quickly to anyone who has had to deal with the United States trade negotiators. It is different, however, from negotiating a trade agreement with the European Union, the difference being that if we are looking at a free trade agreement with the United States, we have to diminish the regulatory and legal differences to get closer to a trade agreement. With the European Union, we begin from identity of regulation and legislation on our trading relationship, which should technically make it much simpler.

What we do not want to do is introduce unnecessary friction and tension. Sadly, that is something that both the Labour leader and the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), the shadow Trade Secretary, as well as the rest of the Opposition, have failed to understand.

As has been made clear on numerous occasions, there could be no joint decision making on trade agreements if the UK is outside the EU in the way that the Labour party pretends there can be. There would be no fully independent trade policy as part of the EU customs union, and the Labour party has absolutely no chance—none, zilch, zero—of negotiating a better deal than the one we have now. There is no need to take my word for it. In response to accusations that Labour's trade policy was “total fantasy”, Jean-Claude Piris, the long-serving former director general of the EU Council's legal service, said:

“Obviously this is ruled out. It is contrary to the basic EU principle of autonomy of decision making. Don't even think about it!”

The Labour party clearly has not thought about it to any satisfactory degree.

Labour's policy, in so far as I understood it following the Leader of the Opposition's interview yesterday on “The Andrew Marr Show”, is that Labour intends to hold a general election and potentially another referendum, including all the legislation that would be required for that, all within 72 days of tomorrow's vote in order to carry out their fantasy policy proposals. It is a total shambles for an Opposition. If they think they could take that to the British public in a general election, they are even more foolish and naive than I had previously considered them to be.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab) *rose*—

Dr Fox: I will give way to the hon. Lady in a moment.

Let me just say something briefly about two other suggestions. Some Members have raised the prospect of a so-called Norway or EEA option. Re-joining the EEA

agreement would mean that we would have to accept all the four freedoms of the single market, including free movement of people. It would not on its own be sufficient to enable our commitments to Northern Ireland to be met, including on avoiding a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. We would be stuck in the single market. If this were combined with staying in a customs union, which some have advocated, we would also be prevented from pursuing a fully independent trade policy. It would also leave our financial services industry, as the Chancellor has said, exposed to a rapidly evolving body of EU regulation over which we would have no influence. In many ways, it would be worse than remaining in the European Union, leaving us with many of the restrictions but, in perpetuity, unable to utilise any of the levers of decision making.

Ruth George: The Secretary of State is making a case against all the alternatives, but is it not the case, as he himself has set out, that there are no legally binding certainties in the future declaration? As he himself set out, we will be seeking to please both the USA and the EU on regulatory alignment. Those things are impossible to do. All this deal signs us up to is years more of uncertainty.

Dr Fox: But we will be taking those decisions. That is the whole point of leaving the European Union: those decisions will be in the hands of the British Government and the British Parliament for us to determine what level of regulatory alignment we want, if any, to maximise our access to trading markets.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dr Fox: I will give way one more time in a moment.

There are also Members of this House who have advocated a second referendum, but there are three substantive problems with that suggestion: on practical grounds, democratic grounds and constitutional grounds. First, in practical terms, it would take time for this House and the other place to pass the necessary primary legislation. The Electoral Commission would also have to fulfil its statutory duty to assess the intelligibility of the question to be posed, a process that takes about 10 weeks. A further 12 weeks would be required between the question being determined and the referendum actually being held. It is therefore completely impractical to hold such a referendum before the United Kingdom leaves the European Union on 29 March. It is entirely possible to see such a process taking up to a year before it could be completed.

Secondly, there are clear democratic grounds to oppose a second referendum. This House voted overwhelmingly to hold the referendum to give the decision on Britain's membership of the European Union to the British people. A "people's vote" has already been held and it produced a clear, unambiguous instruction from the British electorate for us to leave the European Union. We are honour-bound to respect that.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a very impassioned speech in support of the Prime Minister's deal. I too am supportive of that deal. On a point of clarification and accuracy, when he talked about the Norway arrangement he said there would be no opportunity to influence the

rules. Are there not the powers of co-determination for EEA nations within that body to be able to at least have a say at the initial stages when legislation is drafted?

Dr Fox: I have to say in all candour to my hon. Friend that having spoken to a number of my colleagues in Norway, their advice was to retain the ability to have our own free trade agreement and not restrict our freedom in the way that they have.

This House confirmed that we would respect the result of the referendum when we voted overwhelmingly to trigger article 50 and begin the process of negotiations.

Lucy Powell: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Dr Fox: I have already given way to the hon. Lady and I will not do so again.

This was further confirmed by the last general election in which the two main parties, comprising over 80% of the total votes cast, promised to respect the referendum result. Let us imagine that a second referendum were held in which the remain side won, perhaps with a narrow majority but with a lower turnout. Leave supporters like me could well begin demanding a third referendum, a best of three. Where would the process actually end? We have had a people's vote and we need to respect the people's vote. Another referendum would not settle the issue or heal our divisions—quite the opposite. It would further divide our already fractious country at a time when we need to come together.

There is also the constitutional issue. If we overturn this referendum result, we will be setting a precedent that could be applied to other referendums too. Furthermore, a second referendum would create prolonged, not diminished, political and economic uncertainty.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Is not the point about the future trade relationship and the opportunities for global Britain that without this withdrawal agreement there can be no negotiation with Europe, whether to achieve a Canada-plus solution or any other solution? The danger with no deal is that without an agreement at the beginning, we would never be able to structure a future free trade agreement with the European Union.

Dr Fox: As usual, my hon. Friend makes a very good point very clearly. There are, across the House, a number of potential destinations that Members want to see: a Norway-type option, EEA-plus, a Canada-style agreement or FTA-plus. What they all have in common is one thing: there needs to be a withdrawal agreement before we are actually able to have any of them. That is why this particular deal is so important.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dr Fox: I will give way one more time before I finish.

It is time to consign the divisions of the referendum to the past. It is time to raise our sights and acknowledge that there is a world beyond Europe and there will be a time beyond Brexit to build the economic opportunities that this country needs to thrive as a truly global Britain. The withdrawal agreement and political declaration are a way forward to achieve this model; to bring us together, to seize the new opportunities out there in the world economy and to lead our country to a more prosperous, stable and secure future.

[Dr Fox]

While the UK is leaving the European Union, we are certainly not leaving Europe. This agreement provides a foundation on which to build our continued co-operation with our European partners on trading, political and security matters. It will enable us to play a full and active role on the global stage, working closely with friends old and new, and building an independent trade policy that caters to the strengths and requirements of the UK economy. The deal allows the UK to continue to participate in the EU's existing free trade agreements during the implementation period, as has already been mentioned. Crucially, it will also have the benefit of being able to negotiate, sign and ratify new trade agreements and lay the foundations for future relationships with our trading partners across the world. We need to take a balanced approach, acknowledging the continued importance of our EU partners while taking advantage of opportunities beyond the borders of our continent in the high-growth economies of Africa, Asia and South America, which I believe will be key to our economic success as a global Britain.

The deal will give us the freedom to implement our own trade remedies regime, to protect jobs and livelihoods from unfair trade, to set our own trade tariffs and to take up our independent seat at the World Trade Organisation for the first time in more than 40 years. That will be a key opportunity to further our support for the international rules-based trading system and ensure it delivers free and fair trade and, in particular, to pioneer the liberalisation of trade in services.

As I have outlined, there are fundamental changes in the global economy that simply did not exist when the Uruguay round was concluded, and it is right that we position the British economy to take advantage of them. Even as the information revolution continues to transform our world at a staggering pace with the system of free and fair international trade that uplifts it and underpins it, there is still much to do to reduce existing and emerging tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade that already pose a serious threat to global growth. Britain can play a key role in that.

We have an abiding duty to do what we believe is right for our country. Members will take different views, and, as I said at the outset, I respect their ability to do so. I do not in any way undermine their patriotism in taking different views. The agreement carries out the democratic will of the British people to leave the European Union, as expressed by the referendum. It allows the United Kingdom to take back control of our borders, laws and money and delivers a close and co-operative partnership with the European Union but, crucially, outside it. It delivers for the British economy.

No negotiated agreement is likely to deliver everything that anyone wants—perhaps no agreement ever could, but for our communities, our prosperity and for future generations, I believe this agreement is the right thing for the United Kingdom. I commend the Prime Minister's deal to the House.

7.12 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): For many months, we have been confronted with a series of choices and a series of false choices. The country had to choose

whether to leave or remain. Those in the Cabinet had to choose whether to leave or remain in the Cabinet. For many Government Members, the choice has become whether to leave with or without a deal. For many Opposition Members, the choice has been whether to call for a second referendum or to accept the first.

Many famous figures have been quoted since we started our debate back at the beginning of December, but these are the words that keep coming back to me: it is not our abilities in life but our choices that define who we truly are. For all the heart searching and the division that these questions have caused, I am convinced more than ever that the real divide in our country is not between those who voted to remain and those who voted to leave but, as the leader of my party said last week, between the many who do the work, create the wealth and pay the taxes, and the few who set the rules, reap the rewards and so often dodge paying the taxes. The real choice is choosing whose side we are on when we see injustice, unfairness and inequality. In answer to that question, my party—the Labour party—has always throughout its history had one and only one answer. As the party of the many, we seek to heal the appalling divide that we now see in our society.

The speeches that have moved me in the long course of our debate since December were those like that of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), who explained that his constituents were not interested in the processes and the amendments. He said:

“They want to know how they will feed their kids and heat their house, and how they will get to work if there is no bus. How will they make ends meet if they have to move from their current benefit on to universal credit?”

That view was intriguingly echoed from the Government Benches by the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), who said:

“The vote to leave was in no small part a *cri de coeur* from millions of people who feel that the powers that be in Westminster no longer know, let alone care, what it feels like to walk in their shoes...At every level, there was a direct correlation between household income and the likelihood to vote for leaving the EU.”—[*Official Report*, 6 December 2018; Vol. 650, c. 1144-1159.]

The social divide in our country is real. I agree with my colleagues who say, “That was not caused by the European Union.” That is true, but nor did the European Union provide a shield against it. It will not be solved if we become poorer by leaving the EU, but while our country has been a member of the EU, the experience of those millions of people has been the loss of secure jobs, the hollowing out of their communities, and years of austerity and harsh social policy. That is why remaining in the EU does not appear to them to be a solution to the inequality we face.

Cri de coeur it may have been, but those people will feel nothing but anger and disgust for us as politicians if we turn around now and patronise them by ignoring and reversing on the message they gave us in the referendum. My good friend the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) expressed that with an eloquence we rarely hear in the Chamber when she said:

“The right to be heard is a key battleground in the history of our country, and it is at the heart of the age-old division between those who labour in silence and those who speak from a gilded platform.”—[*Official Report*, 4 December 2018; Vol. 650, c. 832.]

My God, I wish I had said that.

When the referendum result came in, those who voted to leave finally felt that their voices had been heard. The House has to understand that despite the social chapter and the good will of our MEPs, the EU did not present itself as a champion of the voiceless. It was against that backdrop that the Prime Minister had an opportunity to put together a future that met the aspirations of those voters. She could and should have recognised that when our fellow citizens are divided 52% to 48%, it is the time not to go back in the political bunker but to reach out. She should have reached out and tried to build a consensus across Parliament that would have united our country. That would have been leadership, but instead she doubled down, put her party interests before the country and tried to appease the European Research Group.

I do not deny that the Prime Minister has shown steel and determination, but there is a point at which steel and determination become obstinacy and recklessness, and she has gone far beyond it. The Labour party consistently argued that before triggering article 50, Parliament must be properly consulted on, and fully involved in, the impact assessments, the right to a meaningful vote, the deal and the financial modelling. We argued that Parliament had the right to see the full legal opinion prepared by the Attorney General. The Prime Minister's refusal at every stage was a blunder that resulted in an achievement unique in 1,000 years of our history in this place: a Government being held to be in contempt of Parliament. That is ironic, given that Brexit was supposed to be about restoring the sovereignty of Parliament.

Charlie Elphicke: The hon. Gentleman talks about the importance of uniting the House. Will he unite with me in rejecting the idea of a second referendum? We need to honour the referendum mandate and leave the European Union.

Barry Gardiner: I will conclude on exactly the point that the hon. Gentleman raises, because it is at the heart of the conundrum facing the House and the country. If he gives me time, I will get there.

Dr Fox: I am grateful for how the hon. Gentleman is setting out his arguments, but if he feels that he was ill informed when article 50 was triggered, why did he vote for it?

Barry Gardiner: The Secretary of State makes a bewildering point, because I did not talk about being ill informed about the triggering of article 50, but he makes his own point and perhaps he understands what he means.

Now that the Prime Minister has finally brought her deal back to the House of Commons, it is hardly surprising that Members on both sides do not believe it to be in the best interests of our country. I know that she is now reaching out to her rather unlikely new-found friends in Unite and the GMB, and even to Opposition Members, but colleagues will recognise that this is a paradigm of too little, too late. Workers' rights and environmental standards and protections are a vital part of Labour's concern about the future relationship. We cannot agree that the UK should be in a situation in which we might fall behind our EU counterparts. The principle of non-regression from current levels makes it almost impossible to take action against the loss of a

specific right but, as the TUC has made clear, what is required is not vague assurances but the binding long-term guarantees that working people need. These are not, even now, being offered.

On 10 December, the Prime Minister called a halt to the first part of the debate. She acknowledged that the package of the withdrawal agreement and the future political framework, as it stood, would not gain the support of the House. She undertook to change it and to come back with legally binding assurances on the backstop after listening to Members' objections. Indeed, the Secretary of State for International Trade went as far as to say:

"I think it is very difficult to support the deal if we don't get changes to the backstop... I'm not even sure if the cabinet will agree for it to be put to the House of Commons."

Well, here it is, and here he is, but the only thing that has changed is that the Prime Minister has lost yet more votes, and more of the confidence of Members and of the country. The letter from the EU that she has brought back is a long way from the significant and legally effective commitment she promised last month. It is a reiteration of the EU's existing position. She has delayed proceedings in a futile bid to run down the clock but, once again, nothing has changed.

Before the intermission in our debate, when the Prime Minister was trying to press her Back Benchers to support her, she claimed repeatedly that there was no possibility of renegotiation, but then, when defeat seemed inevitable, she scrambled back to Europe in a vain attempt to do precisely that.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): You are criticising—*[Interruption.]* I do apologise, Mr Speaker; Even Homer nods. The hon. Gentleman said that the Prime Minister told us that she could not renegotiate, but now criticises her for coming back saying she could not renegotiate, as she said. That seems a little unfair.

Barry Gardiner: The hon. Gentleman is extremely courteous and always punctilious about the truth of what is said in this Chamber. I simply stated the fact that the Prime Minister had said it was impossible to renegotiate but that, when she faced defeat, she tried to do what she herself had said was impossible.

The Government could have used some of this time to respond to the Treasury Committee by providing proper economic assessments containing an analysis of the Northern Ireland backstop and setting out the short-term economic impact of the Prime Minister's proposed deal. On 11 December, the Committee published its report on the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration. It concluded:

"The White Paper scenario, which is akin to the Chequers proposal, represents the most optimistic and generous reading of the Political Declaration, insofar as it is consistent with it at all. It does not represent the central or most likely outcome under the Political Declaration. Therefore, it cannot be used to inform Parliament's meaningful vote on the Withdrawal Agreement. The information provided includes no analysis of the Backstop, and there is no short-term analysis of any of the scenarios, including on public finances and on regional and sectoral job losses and gains. The Government has only provided long-term analysis, which does not show how the economy will transition to a new trading relationship, or the path taken by inflation and unemployment".

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The Chair of the Committee, the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), commented:

“The aim of this report is not to recommend how MPs should vote, but to ensure that MPs are as informed as possible when it comes to choosing a division lobby. Yet the Government has made this difficult to achieve. The Committee is disappointed that the Government has modelled its White Paper, which represents the most optimistic reading of the Political Declaration, rather than a more realistic scenario. The Committee is also disappointed that the Treasury has not analysed the backstop and fails to include short-term analysis of any of the scenarios, including impacts on public finances and on regional and sectoral job losses or gains.”

In the Chancellor’s letter responding to the Committee, he revealed that

“there is not yet sufficient specificity on detailed arrangements for modelling purposes, and therefore the provisions of the backstop have not been included in the analysis.”

Indeed! Members are being asked to take one of the most important decisions for our country on the basis of inadequate financial information, and it is precisely this lack of specificity that has left Members across the House unable to have confidence in the Prime Minister’s deal.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): Will the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that the cross-Government modelling to which he refers looked at the situation 15 years out? Of course it does not reflect the inclusion of the backstop. The backstop, if it were used, would be a temporary arrangement, so it is completely irrelevant to the stable state 15 years out.

Barry Gardiner: Of course it was right to look at the 15-year long-term assessment. Nobody is disputing that. Indeed, I will quote later from precisely that analysis. The problem is—and this is not just my criticism but the all-party Treasury Select Committee’s criticism—that these crucial elements of how we will transition to the future relationship have not been analysed or presented to the House.

Charlie Elphicke: As a member of that Committee, I share the hon. Gentleman’s concerns about the modelling, and I do believe that the Treasury needs to get better at listening, but would he agree that Labour’s various Brexit tests are not worth the paper they are written on? Indeed, I believe one member of the shadow Cabinet used a profanity in describing Labour’s Brexit policy not so long ago.

Barry Gardiner: Oh dear, Mr Speaker!

It is precisely this lack of specificity that has left Members across the House unable to have confidence in the Prime Minister’s deal. I probably should not call it a deal, because the future political framework document is no more than a placeholder for the future trade and security agreements that the Government hope eventually to conclude. It is both this lack of detail and the fact that the Prime Minister has wound down the clock that have significantly reduced the ability of Parliament to be properly involved in the most important decision facing our country.

When my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), the shadow Brexit Secretary, fought and won the battle for a meaningful vote, which is now scheduled for tomorrow, he made it

clear that the word “meaningful” must imply both a level of detail and clarity about what was proposed and a timeliness that would enable Parliament to amend the proposal and the Government to respond appropriately. We should not forget that originally the Government quite correctly wished to pursue the negotiations on the withdrawal agreement and the political framework side by side, but they agreed the chronology set out by the European Union.

That, I believe, was a mistake, but it made it all the more important that the negotiations on phase one be concluded expeditiously. The Government failed to do that. As a consequence, they ended up agreeing to everything that was vital to the EU in the withdrawal agreement and leaving everything about the future trade, security and political agreement that is vital to the UK to fall into a thin wish list, with words such as “the parties envisage”, “the parties will explore”, “the parties will use their best endeavours”.

The truth is that the real negotiations that will affect our economic life and our citizens’ future security have not yet properly begun. Look at the provisions for data protection: we have lost our place on the European Data Protection Board. The Prime Minister said in Munich that staying on it was one of her objectives so that we could continue to influence the rules and development of the general data protection regulation regime that we had been so influential in setting up. We will still have to comply with the scheme, but under the political declaration the EU will “start the assessments” of whether it should recognise the UK as a fit regime and will endeavour to reach a decision by 2020.

It is the same with REACH and the chemicals regulations: these are areas in which the EU is leading the world and in which we were leading the EU. No longer—our chemicals industry has spent more than half a billion pounds registering more than 6,000 chemicals with the EU’s database. The Government are now asking it to re-register every single one with our own Health and Safety Executive because we will no longer have access to that EU database. It is the same for financial services, where we are talking about equivalence, not even mutual recognition: the EU will start assessing whether it can declare our regulatory and supervisory regime is equivalent only after the withdrawal date. Then it says that it will try to reach a decision before the end of June 2020. Well, how very good of it.

The hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah) spoke with great clarity and from his own bitter experience of negotiating with the EU when he advised the House:

“We must be clear-eyed as we go into these negotiations because they have been set up for failure. The EU will manage the timetable, it will manage the sequencing of the negotiations, it will set the hurdles and it will tell us when we can progress to the next stage. That is what happened in the first phase of the negotiations and that is what will happen in the second phase. We will always be in a position in which we have to walk away or fold”.

The hon. Gentleman was clear about what he thought would happen, from his own experience of negotiating Galileo. He said:

“we will always fold because the clock will be ticking.”—[*Official Report*, 5 December 2018; Vol. 650, c. 920.]

I agree. If we give the green light to the Prime Minister’s proposals tomorrow, we will end up not with the unique agreement that the future framework dangles before us,

but with a free trade agreement dictated to us by the EU. We will have a long and difficult road to a future trade agreement that will not solve the economic problems we face or heal the divisions in our society. In the weeks since the Government called a halt to this debate, the US ambassador put to bed any idea of a quick and massive trade deal with the Americans. I do not usually find myself in agreement with the Trump Administration, but the assessment made in Washington that there will be little scope for a major trade deal with the United States is one with which I wholly concur.

The future political framework sets out that “the United Kingdom’s commitments on customs and regulatory cooperation, including with regard to alignment of rules, would be taken into account in the application of related checks and controls”.

There is nothing remarkable there, really—it is what we in the Opposition have been pointing out for a very long time. If we want a strong trade relationship, the facility of market access must be proportionate to regulatory alignment.

Ruth George: Does my hon. Friend agree that the problems of regulatory alignment with very different actors such as the United States of America and the EU, with which we will both seek to do a free trade agreement, will make it extremely difficult for us to conclude agreements with both? We will have to prioritise one over the other. The USA has asked for access to our internal health markets and says that we will have to align our food standards down to theirs, so our having to choose might be a very good thing.

Barry Gardiner: I am pleased that I gave way to my hon. Friend, who has said what it is critical to understand on both sides of the House: we cannot simply have deals with everybody that are as good with everybody. We will have to pick and choose.

For my own part, I have never been star-struck by the prospect of a trade agreement with the USA; even under President Obama, it wanted us to weaken our food standards so that it could increase access for American agri-foods to the UK.

Boris Johnson *rose—*

Barry Gardiner: I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman in a minute—and quicker than his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development did.

Ten days ago, I had the pleasure of attending the Oxford farming conference. It was clear that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, who had spoken to them the day before, had got farmers seriously concerned. They were pleased that he confirmed that our food production standards in the UK would not be reduced, but incensed by his refusal to deny that food from the USA and elsewhere, which had been produced to lower standards, would be allowed access into the UK to undercut them in our domestic market. That, according to the Government, of course, is not a lowering of our standards in the UK but simply consumer choice and the pursuit of free trade. I now give way to the former Foreign Secretary.

Boris Johnson: I admire the tone in which the hon. Gentleman is making his remarks. May I ask him about the free trade deals that he says Labour would like

to pursue? I am puzzled to hear that. It was my impression that Labour had abandoned its policy of coming out of the customs union and was instead preparing for us to remain in it as a paying, participating member, setting the same tariffs. Will he explain exactly how that is supposed to work?

Barry Gardiner: I am delighted to say that the rest of my speech will be doing precisely that; I hope it will satisfy the right hon. Gentleman.

Alignment of standards is key to trade. That was properly recognised by the Minister for Trade Policy himself—sadly, he is not in his place at the moment—when he said:

“If we come out of alignment with EU regulations in this area, then there is a penalty to be paid in terms of frictionless trade with Europe.”

Of course, the idea that this particular American President is not going to demand greater access for American healthcare businesses into our NHS is simply a fantasy. So yes—I would love to do more business with the USA. It is already our major bilateral trading partner as a country rather than a bloc, but whatever benefits a trade agreement with it may bring must be weighed against the corresponding losses in our existing or any future trade agreement with the EU.

Lucy Powell: Is my hon. Friend aware that, before the referendum, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) said that staying in the single market was “essential and deliverable”?

Barry Gardiner: I am glad to say that the one thing that I can honestly claim I have no responsibility for are the words of the right hon. Gentleman.

When listening to some of the more extreme proponents of Brexit, it has often amused me to hear them say that trading with the European Union on World Trade Organisation terms would not be the slightest problem for us; in the same breath, they insist that to achieve our destiny we cannot possibly trade on WTO terms with the United States—and that that is why we need to break free from the EU.

The simple truth is this—I hope it answers the right hon. Gentleman’s question: it makes good sense to have good trade agreements with everyone, but to have the best trade agreements with our closest trading partners. For us, that is the EU, with which we do 53% of our trade and which takes 44% of our exports.

Boris Johnson *rose—*

Barry Gardiner: No, I will not give way again to the right hon. Gentleman.

I move on to immigration, which was a key part of the referendum debate. Like many Members, I was outraged by the dog-whistle politics of the Vote Leave campaign’s very own “Project Fear”: that millions of Turkish citizens would be queuing up for entry into the UK. That was a lie, and those Members who associated themselves with that campaign should feel ashamed.

I also want to express my disgust at those who have sought to paint leave voters as ignorant racists; it is that sort of demonisation of our fellow citizens that is so damaging to the discourse around Brexit. It precisely obscures some of the real concerns that leave voters did express, and had every right to. Their concerns were about the lack of housing, the strains on the NHS, and

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being undercut in the workplace by unscrupulous employers who often exploited migrants and paid them less than the minimum wage. All those issues are about public services and domestic enforcement. They will not be solved by our leaving the EU, but they will also not be solved by our remaining. What is needed is a change of Government policy, or, better still, a change of Government.

Immigration is a vital element of our economic growth, and of our trade and trade negotiations. We need migration. The Government's own economic assessment shows that European migration contributes 2% of GDP to the UK. The Government's proposed £30,000 salary threshold would actually preclude three quarters of EU migrants. I am not referring simply to seasonal agricultural workers or careworkers; even some junior doctors do not earn more than £30,000 a year. The Government's supposed skills threshold is really a salary threshold, and it would do serious damage to our economy.

The irony is, of course, that EU net migration is coming down. Statistics published just last month record the number as 74,000. The Government have been complaining that free movement gives them no control over those people. Presumably they mean the sort of control that they have always been able to exercise over migrants coming from the rest of the world. Is it not strange, then, that the figure recorded for net migration from the rest of the world is 248,000?

This is why politicians are not trusted. They tell people that we need to abolish freedom of movement to bring migration down to the tens of thousands when our own rules, over which the EU has never had any say, are allowing three times that number. What we should be explaining to people is that net migration should go both up and down in line with the needs of our economy. As long as we have fair rules and competent and reasonable management of migration, this country will be better off. The trouble is that we have had lies, arbitrary targets that bear no relation to our economy's requirements, and, frankly, administrative incompetence.

As with regulatory alignment, so with the exchange of people. The deeper the trade deal we want, the greater the need for an exchange of people. Foreign companies that invest in the UK want and need their indigenous workers to get visas, and the harder we make that process, the less investment we will secure. When the Prime Minister went to India two years ago to secure a trade deal, she was rebuffed on precisely that issue. *The Times of India* summed it up on its front page with the headline "You want our business. But you do not want our People".

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Barry Gardiner: No. I have not spoken for as long as the Secretary of State and I do not intend to, but 80 Members wish to speak, so I will make some progress.

Our universities and colleges represent one of the greatest exports that our country has: education, which contributes hugely to our economy, not just through fees but through the industrial spin-offs from our world-leading research. That depends on our bringing top brains from all over the globe, and encouraging them to

see the UK as their intellectual home. However, the bogus colleges scandal, and the way in which we have treated students whose colleges are closed down or go into receivership, has been a disgrace. They are victims of fraud because our system of certification has been so poor, but we treat them as if they were the criminals. They are given just 60 days to find another college, often in the middle of an academic year, and then to pay another full year's fees before they are classed as illegal overstayers. No wonder students from key future trading partners in China and India are now turning to Australia, Canada and the US as their first choices for higher education and research. [Interruption.]

The Under-Secretary of State for International Trade, the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), asks why I am running down our education service. If he had listened carefully, he would have heard me talk about our world-leading research and our top-quality universities. What I ran down was the incompetent administration of the certification of bogus colleges, and the incompetent administration of the immigration rules thereafter.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): Give way.

Barry Gardiner: The hon. Gentleman may not have noticed, but I did give way.

Students should never have been part of our net migration figures, and immigration should be proclaimed loudly by every Member to be an important and hugely beneficial resource for our economy. Yes, free movement of people will end when we leave the EU, because it is a function of the treaties of the EU, but that does not mean that we should not operate a system of immigration controls with the EU that allows broad and reciprocal access to all our citizens in a way that maximises the benefits to all our economies. That is what our businesses need: access to skills.

For all that, however, some businesses are willing to accept the Prime Minister's deal. They have expressed grudging acceptance of it, and some have even written to their Members of Parliament asking them to support it. Well, there is the proof that "Project Fear" works both ways. The Government are holding a gun to business's head with the threat of no deal, and, given this Hobson's choice, some have been blackmailed into acquiescing in the Prime Minister's proposal. I am sure that their acquiescence will have been cemented by the cheery words of the Secretary of State this morning, when he advised the nation that he did not regard no deal as "national suicide", and that, although he grudgingly accepted that it would "damage our economy", he thought that it was "survivable"—and this from the man who once said that a trade deal with the EU would be

"the easiest in human history".

It is so good that the Secretary of State and the Chancellor are sharing the debate. I had some little hope that the Chancellor might have sat with him and taken him through the economic analyses. With no change in migration, no deal would see the UK's GDP 7.7% lower than it would otherwise be. According to the estimates of the Office for Budget Responsibility, that is £164 billion if translated into the current fiscal year. With zero net EEA worker inflows, no deal would

see the UK's GDP 9.3%, or £198 billion, lower than otherwise. That is a heck of a lot of Brexit buses for the NHS: 565.

Unfortunately, during the first part of the debate, the Secretary of State told the House effectively to ignore all the Chancellor's carefully prepared scenarios and analyses. Back in December, he said:

"It is not realistic to expect that there would be no potential shift, if necessary, in Government fiscal policy, or in the Bank of England's monetary policy, or changes to what the Government will be able to do on tariffs. We have to be realistic and try to understand what those things are. To try to confuse forecasts and scenarios, intentionally or otherwise, is not helpful to the debate."—[*Official Report*, 6 December 2018; Vol. 650, c. 1203-4.]

Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Barry Gardiner: No.

Actually, what is not helpful to the debate is to dismiss the existing economic modelling without presenting any credible alternative, to fail to provide any analyses of the short-term consequences of the Prime Minister's deal, and to fail to carry out any analysis at all of the Northern Irish backstop arrangements—and then to have the audacity to expect the nation to blindly trust that no deal is not "national suicide".

Conor Burns: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Barry Gardiner: I will.

Conor Burns: Will the hon. Gentleman concede that it is entirely possible that the current Treasury forecasts will prove to be as accurate as the ones that it made before the referendum?

Barry Gardiner: I think we should look at what actually happened, and it is relevant to the point that the Secretary of State was trying to make back in December. People are very fond of saying, "There were predictions of disaster and financial meltdown, but nothing happened." Well, actually, something did happen: I think it was called "£70 billion of quantitative easing", which the Treasury put into the economy in order to stop the problems.

Of course the Secretary of State once believed that his friends in the Anglosphere would be queuing up to do new trade agreements that would replace any lost GDP growth. The Bank of England has quantified the potential value of those deals at just 0.2%—not 2%, but 0.2%, or one fifth of 1%, or £4.25 billion. Nice to have, but by my reckoning the Secretary of State would still owe me about 533 Brexit buses.

The Prime Minister is fond of saying that her deal is the only one on the table. Well, of course it is; she is the Government, and only the Government are able to negotiate with the EU. That does not mean that there could not be a different deal. The Brexit negotiations have been constrained by the Prime Minister's red lines. We know that had the red lines been different then the deal would have been different also.

The Father of the House, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), reminded us in his admonishment of the Home Secretary that

"if we are maintaining an open border where there is a land border, it can only be done in a modern economy by having some form of customs union applying to both sides of the border".—[*Official Report*, 5 December 2018; Vol. 650, c. 900.]

That is why we on the Labour Benches have been calling for a new permanent customs union with the EU in which we would have a say over future trade agreements.

When the shadow Chancellor mentioned this previously in our debate the Secretary of State was really rather rude and he reinforced that disparagement today. He reminded the House that under article 3 of the treaty on the functioning of the European Union the EU shall have exclusive competence with regard to the customs union. Of course it does: the treaty binds the member states of the EU and gives the Commission that right to negotiate the terms of any agreement with third-party countries. It does not stop the EU concluding agreements with third-party countries where there is joint control.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Barry Gardiner: No.

Perhaps I can read from article 8 of the TFEU:

"The Union shall develop a special relationship with neighbouring countries, aiming to establish an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness, founded on the values of the Union and characterised by close and peaceful relations based on cooperation.

2. For the purposes of paragraph 1, the Union may conclude specific agreements with the countries concerned. These agreements may contain reciprocal rights and obligations as well as the possibility of undertaking activities jointly."

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Barry Gardiner: I will not give way as I am moving to my conclusion.

A new customs union in which the UK would be able to reject any agreement it believed was concluded to its disadvantage—however advantageous it might be for the 27 EU member states—is a vital way of securing the open trade border, avoiding the problems of the backstop and respecting the referendum mantra of taking back control. It should have been part of our negotiating mandate from the beginning.

So often it has seemed, on both sides of the Brexit divide, that the point of listening has been to prepare one's counter-arguments and rebut what the other person is saying, rather than any genuine attempt to understand their fears and concerns, so I want to conclude by sharing with colleagues my own fears and concerns about the position we are in. It seems to me that we are caught between two competing and equally important principles: our responsibility to protect the economic wellbeing and livelihoods of our constituents; and our democratic responsibility to accept the result of a referendum where we promised to respect the result. The first principle is often invoked by colleagues who say, "Nobody voted to make themselves poorer or put themselves out of a job," and that is true. The second principle is often invoked by colleagues who say that we will damage our democracy and increase cynicism about politics if we turn round and pat the electorate on the head and basically say "There, there! You didn't understand. You were lied to. We will give you another chance to see it our way."

I have found myself genuinely torn apart by these competing claims, as I know many colleagues have. It seems to me that it is simply not good enough to insist either that we remain or that we leave no matter the cost. Both these positions are absolutes, and while we may campaign in black and white, we must govern in

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shades of grey. Each absolute side of the debate must be able to have a credible explanation for the roughly 50% of their fellow citizens who profoundly disagree with them as to why they should not be taken into account.

I know what I promised my constituents at the last general election. It is right here in our manifesto:

“Labour accepts the referendum result”—

not that we would respect it, but that we would accept it.

“We will prioritise jobs and living standards, build a close new relationship with the EU, protect workers’ rights and environmental standards, provide certainty to EU nationals and give a meaningful role to Parliament throughout negotiations.”

That is the rejoinder to those who pretend that our Brexit position has not been clear. It has been there, consistent and unchanged in black and white, since the general election. That is what this Government should have done; it is what we—[*Interruption.*] That is what this Government should have done; it is what we would have done and what a new Government now need to do.

And one thing more. We said that we would

“seek to unite the country around a Brexit deal that works for every community in Britain.”

The Prime Minister’s deal does not, and that is why Parliament must reject it.

7.56 pm

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I recognise that time is short, so I will not go on for too long and I will not take too many interventions—but you never know, you might get lucky.

I appreciate the excellent speech of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, but, while I wanted to agree with it all, I have to tell him that I did not wholly agree with it, and I want to address a couple of points. I do not doubt for one moment his sincere desire to make sure that this country is able to strike trade deals around the world and thus make the greatest advantage from the big decision taken back in 2016. The question for me is: are we going to be able to do that, and what does this agreement do to help us—or does it help us?

Alignment is a very big and important issue in the agreement, and we have conceded too much to the EU, which will hamstring us in our future trade agreements. I think my right hon. Friend has actually said that elsewhere, and as he knows, the US ambassador also made that point clear recently. We may want to do financial services deals with other countries, but many other countries, including the United States of America, will want to do more on agricultural and mechanical exports. Agriculture is a big deal in the States and they would like to do that, but in our country there has been a rather supercilious and pointless debate about things like chlorinated chicken. We tend to get a bit arrogant and think that somehow we are fantastically superior—[HON. MEMBERS: “We are.”] Well, on the issue of so-called chlorinated chicken, America has a lower level of death and illness from campylobacter or salmonella than us here in the UK. That is because some of our chicken imports come from way outside the EU and are less than great. So we should not be so arrogant about thinking our standards are higher than everyone else’s.

I want to make three main points about why I am concerned, and then I will conclude. The first concern is the backstop; the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) referred to it, and we have all referred to it. My concern about the backstop is twofold. First, if we go into the backstop it will trap us and take our ability to leave out of our own hands. It will be the first time that, as a sovereign nation, we will have agreed to let others decide whether we can stay in or leave an international agreement. We can leave NATO, we can leave the UN if we wish, and we can even leave the EU at our vote, but in this case we will not be able to leave; there will have to be a joint agreement about departure, and there is no time limit to it.

I was therefore very interested to see what the Prime Minister would come back with on the agreement. I see that the letter from President Tusk and President Juncker to her says, “It’s very, very good and important because it is in fact internationally legally binding,” but they know and we know that that is not the same as being bound in by the terms of the agreement. The agreement overrides every other purpose. It was interesting that when the previous Prime Minister was negotiating, prior to the referendum, he claimed the same about his agreement, but again, it did not override European law. The letter from the European Union actually says:

“As you know, we are not in a position to agree to anything that changes or is inconsistent with the Withdrawal Agreement”.

Even more important than that is what the Attorney General has said about this. There was a great moment here when the Prime Minister quite legitimately said that the Attorney General had spoken about the balance and said that we were now accepting that there was some kind of lock in legal terms, but what she did not do was read the last sentence of the paragraph in the Attorney General’s letter, which deals with the EU’s conclusions in relation to the withdrawal agreement, and states

“albeit they do not alter the fundamental meaning of its provisions as I advised them to be on 13 November”.

That fundamental advice was simply this:

“Therefore, despite statements in the Protocol that it is not intended to be permanent, and the clear intention of the parties that it should be replaced by alternative, permanent arrangements, in *international law* the Protocol would endure indefinitely until a superseding arrangement took its place, in whole or in part, as set out therein.”

That really reminds us that there is a fundamental flaw in this.

I do not fear us going into the backstop. My real problem is that, when it comes to negotiating our future trading arrangements, the European Union will have a very big stick to hold over us. President Macron made that clear recently when he talked about grabbing back some of the fishing rights that we may well have taken in the course of the early withdrawal agreement. He said that he would simply wait until we got closer to the backstop, because at that point we would do almost anything to avoid falling into it. I do not disagree with him. It would be appalling if we ended up in the backstop. The EU knows it and we know it, and that is the major problem.

That is in line with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State’s earlier remarks, on which I have already complimented him—I have no doubt of his determination to drive these points through. Also, it is small wonder that my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and

Fulham (Greg Hands) said in an interesting intervention the other day that he had carefully read many interviews in German and that Mr Selmayr had made it clear that the European Union had got all its objectives for the withdrawal agreement happily sorted out. Clearly that must mean that we did not do so. That is the major problem. It is important not to be in the backstop, but the most important thing is that not falling into it is what changes the pattern of the political agreement and of how we negotiate the trade arrangements. Therefore, with respect to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, it is a major problem.

My second point is that we have agreed to pay £39 billion. I am not against us agreeing to pay the European Union in order to stand by further agreements, if they exist. After all, I believe that the EU said £100 billion to begin with, and we have now come down to £39 billion, which suggests that there were not quite so many absolutes in the set of things that we were supposed to be engaged in. I do not want to be mealy-mouthed about this, but £39 billion is a lot of money. One section of that relates to the two-year interregnum, which I accept would cost us money. That is a total of £22 billion over the two years that we would owe the EU—that is part of the budget. The rest is about the future arrangements.

My concern is that, according to this arrangement, the EU would get that money regardless of whether we reached a satisfactory agreement. That is quite an important feature. Back in December, I said on record that I thought the Government would be mistaken to agree to both the backstop and the money without having any idea of what the trade position would be. The Government said, “Don’t worry, we will come on to trade immediately and it will open the door.” Well, it did not open the door, and we only got on to trade a few months before Christmas. We have given the EU the most important negotiating position we have, and it has left us with very little with which to drive the EU into the next element of this, which is the thing we really want—namely, trade.

I do not resile from the point that we want a trade deal with our nearest trading partner. Of course we do. We do not want to end up in some kind of spitting war with the EU; we want a decent, reasonable arrangement, but we also want other arrangements around the world. As it stands, the problem is that the £39 billion is hinged on nothing at all, and the EU will get it regardless. There is not much incentive for the EU to produce the sort of trade arrangement that we would want, and that is what worries me.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making some good points, and he has a great deal of experience from his previous Department, the Department for Work and Pensions. I put it to him that this money is important for keeping our relationship with Europe going and for getting the negotiations that we want. I would not call £39 billion small fry, but I did a calculation last night and found that it equates to just 74 days of DWP spending. So in the grand scheme of things, it is not a huge amount of money for what we are getting out of it and for the relationship that we need to build.

Mr Duncan Smith: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I know that it was well meant, but I speak as someone who eventually resigned because

we had to make a £12 billion cut to the welfare budget, and we are now saying that we will spend £39 billion on something else. I think that those two bear a slightly different comparison. I will simply say that there is nothing small about £39 billion. I honestly believe that one of the reasons we voted to leave was to take back control and get most of our money back from the European Union, and to use it for the sort of things that my hon. Friend might well be suggesting. As I said earlier, in principle, and providing that we get something really good from the EU, I am not against meeting our requirements. However, I am against doing that without any commitment whatsoever. That is where my major, and I hope gentle, criticism of my hon. Friend lies.

My third point is about state aid. This issue has not really raised its head much, and those on the Front Benches might want to pay attention. A lot of people think that state aid is just about a few provisions stopping people giving their domestic industries a head start. I have always had a concern about this in democratic terms. I know that many on my side will say, “Oh, it’s terrible; we’re not in favour of giving industries a boost.” Well, we might not be, but we live in a democracy and in reality, others might wish to pitch for a different position. I accept that fully, but I really hope that the public never vote for that. I believe we have a better provision, but there is a democratic problem involved.

However, that is not my main issue, which is the width with which state aid is now being interpreted. I made a speech about this back in 1993 or 1994, in which I said that the Commission knew very well that no matter what it did and failed to get, the Courts would mop up after it because the Courts were bound by one thing and one thing only, which was always to find in favour of ever closer union. Of course they are; that is what they were set up to do. That is very clear, but many in this House do not seem to recognise that fact. The Courts always pick up the pieces. We have only to look at social security spending on people coming into the UK under freedom of movement. Originally, that spending was never in the treaty. It is the Courts, through a whole number of cases, that have widened the provisions to allow those coming into the UK to claim benefits exactly in line with people living in this country. That was not done by the Commission or the Council; it was the Courts.

That is exactly what is happening now. The Commission has had real problems with tax harmonisation. That is its objective for the eurozone and generally for the European Union. The Courts are now entering this area and using the provisions on state aid to find against countries that find new tax advantages. That is where they intend to go, and when we read the summaries of some of the judgments, we can see that they are already moving into this area. I therefore say to colleagues who think that it is all right to sit back passively for two years that there is already a plan to drive that process harder. I have also heard that eight of the 12 people responsible for monitoring the EU’s provisions on state aid have now been moved to cover the UK in the two-year period before we strike a trade deal. I warn my colleagues on the Government Benches that we should be careful what we wish for, because those state aid provisions will bite us on tax harmonisation and of some of the changes we might wish to make in future Budgets.

[Mr Duncan Smith]

I will conclude now so that others may speak. We have had a series of scare stories about a whole series of problems that could arise if we do not strike an arrangement. I want to have an arrangement—don't get me wrong; I absolutely want it—and I think that the Government are in the right place to want to get it as well. I just do not think that this arrangement delivers on the minimum that we require to be able to negotiate and deliver a proper trade deal.

I say to my hon. Friends that we really need to pack up this idea about a total disaster that keeps being pumped around. As my right hon. Friend the International Trade Secretary said from the Dispatch Box today and has made clear before, he does not believe that a no-deal Brexit would be a disaster; he believes that we will manage our way through it one way or another.

The other day we were told that there would be huge queues at Dover because Calais, according to the contingency executive, will have to check every single lorry, taking 10 minutes each time. What did we hear from the man who runs Boulogne and Calais? He said, "We have no plans to and will not check every lorry. We will do nothing more than we are doing at the moment. Any phytosanitary checks will be done 12 km behind the border." Those on the continent do not want what we say we fear, because it would damage them and their business, and they know that they would lose it. That is just one example of some of the nonsense that has gone on with "Project Fear" over the past few years. It has been constantly banged on about. Far from making people concerned, however, it has made people angry about what politicians do to try to threaten and worry them. Let us treat the people like grown-ups and talk about matters properly instead of trying to frighten them.

Richard Graham: My right hon. Friend says that his concerns over supporting the Government's deal and the withdrawal agreement Bill relate to the position that they would leave us in for future free trade agreements. However, without the withdrawal agreement Bill, there can be no future trade agreements. What is his position on that?

Mr Duncan Smith: My position is that we go back and get a better deal. That is the reality, because I believe that that is how the EU works. The EU got everything it wanted first time round, but if it knows that we are not going to take this deal, it will have to discuss it. When I visited the European Commission and met Mr Barnier and Sabine Weyand and their team, it became clear, before we signed up to this deal, that they were fully expecting to take things further once pressed hard—that is to say, they expected that this deal would not pass. They have been waiting for this vote to know exactly where they are going. I genuinely think that the Government will be in a better place to go and say, "Look, this stuff that you've given us and this stuff that we've got is simply not acceptable, and we will not get it through." Therefore, if we genuinely want to reach an agreement—I believe that the EU does—we must strike a harder deal with them, and they have to accept that and will do so. That is where we are.

Back in 1992, I realised that the plans under the Single European Act and Maastricht were taking us to a place that we would never be in, because this country

would never accept that it would eventually be fully locked into a supranational organisation that was taking powers away from individual Parliaments. That is why I feel upbeat about the referendum vote. I am tired of being told that it was some sort of disaster or accident. When I campaigned to leave, I genuinely and passionately believed that this country would do incredibly well whatever the arrangements. I just wish that many more in this House would stand up for those who voted to leave genuinely—not stupidly and not because they hated people, but because they wanted something to change. They wanted to take back control of their country, and that is what I want to do here.

8.12 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is an honour to speak for the Scottish National party on the second-to-last day of our second meaningful vote debate. The SNP positions on Brexit and the Prime Minister's deal are probably pretty obvious to everybody in this House, but I will explain them just for the avoidance of doubt.

The Prime Minister said today that she wants to deliver on the result of the vote. The people of Scotland voted to remain in the EU. Therefore, the SNP will continue to fight for us to remain in the EU. We want to deliver on the vote that Scotland took in that referendum. The best future for us all is to remain a member of the EU. If we cannot remain a member of the EU, we need single market and customs union membership. I know that many Members from across the House believe that that would be the best way for us to go forward economically, and the Prime Minister needs to go away and extend article 50 so that we can have a people's vote. We should give the people the choice to remain in the EU, because the SNP believes, as do many across the House, that they would make a different choice.

I want to talk about several things, many of which have been mentioned today, but I will start by discussing the economy, as the House would expect from the SNP's spokesperson on the economy at Westminster. Mark Carney from the Bank of England said that Brexit has already cost each family £900. Given that we have had so many years of austerity, that is £900 that few can easily afford. The Chancellor himself said that remaining in the European Union would be a better outcome for the economy, and that is absolutely the case. We will be poorer as a result of the UK choosing to leave the EU, which is why organisations such as the CBI say that they are looking on in horror at the foreseeable economic catastrophe that the UK is choosing to bring upon itself and the ham-fisted way it is going about it.

An awful lot of people have come out with an awful lot of stats around Brexit, and I want to highlight a few of them. The Bank of England said that, with the Prime Minister's deal, we are looking at a potential interest rate of 4%, and I want to unpack that a little bit. People who are my age, people who are a little bit older than me, and people who have been in the property market for a relatively short period of time have never seen interest rates anywhere like 4%. It is incredibly difficult for young people nowadays to buy property as it is. If we see a massive increase in interest rates, it will be absolutely and completely impossible for the vast majority of young people to buy property—even more than it is

today—because it will be difficult for people to borrow money. That will have an effect not just on individuals, but on companies that are looking to borrow money. Our small businesses will therefore be less able to trade and to grow as a result of the changes that are potentially coming.

Speaking of businesses, the University of Bristol said that the decision to leave has meant that the value of UK companies has already been reduced by 16%. We have not even left the EU yet, but the value of UK companies has been reduced by 16%, and we are continuing to go down this route. Jaguar Land Rover has already cut 1,500 UK jobs and is looking to cut another 4,500, most of which will be in the UK, and it has cited Brexit concerns as a major factor.

On the subject of car manufacturing, I want to talk about what just-in-time manufacturing actually means, because it is quite difficult for people to get that concept into their heads. Does it mean that the car production plants or factories have maybe a day's worth of widgets sitting there that can be put together to make a car or whatever is being made? No, it means that they have an hour's worth of widgets. If Honda wanted to have nine days' worth of stock for its Swindon plant alone, it would need a UK warehouse of roughly 300,000 square metres. It would be one of the largest buildings on earth, and that is for nine days' worth of widgets in order to make cars. It would be absolutely impossible for the UK to find enough warehouse space to store all the widgets that it would need for all the manufactured things that we produce. The Secretary of State for International Trade was talking earlier about all the brilliant manufacturing that is done in Britain, but a huge amount of that is done with components imported from the EU.

David T. C. Davies: In the early 1990s, I worked in the haulage industry as a lorry driver making just-in-time deliveries of brake parts for Lucas Girling across the whole of Europe—in and out of the EU. There was never a problem, because the paperwork could be turned around in the time it took to have a coffee and a cigarette. It was not a problem then, and we did not even have a computer in the office.

Kirsty Blackman: Things were a bit different in 1993 from how they are now. We have customs checks that are required to be done. We have these production lines, and the storage time is much shorter because we have frictionless movement. If frictionless movement is so unimportant, why have the Government been prioritising it in the potential future relationship with the EU?

This is not just about the EU. The UK Government have also failed to set out exactly what the future relationship with Turkey is going to look like, for example. Will widgets still be able to come in from Turkey in the event of a no-deal scenario?

The Secretary of State for International Trade was pressed earlier on whether free trade agreements with third countries will roll over. The UK Government have absolutely failed to let us or businesses know which countries have agreed to sign up for their free trade agreement to be rolled over in the event of a no-deal Brexit. Given that the largest manufacturing companies are preparing for a no-deal Brexit, the Government need to be up front and honest about how many of

those free trade agreements will actually roll over. I have heard that, potentially, only 10 of them are ready to be rolled over. If that is the case, the Government need to tell us which 10 so that the companies exporting to or importing from those countries can make plans.

Seema Malhotra: Does the hon. Lady agree it is surprising we did not have a clearer answer on that from the Secretary of State? This is of paramount importance for businesses like those in my constituency that are trading under multiple trade agreements and exporting across the world.

Kirsty Blackman: I agree that it is absolutely vital. It is interesting that the Secretary of State was unable to give that answer. I have a named day question on this subject and am expecting a response tomorrow. I am aware of at least one organisation that has been asking the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy for the list since November and still has not received it. If the Government intend us to leave the EU on 29 March, and if they intend that we leave with no deal if this deal is not voted through, they need to tell companies about the scenario in which they will be operating after we leave the EU in those circumstances. The Government are wilfully making the situation worse by their refusal to come forward with this information.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Following BMW-Mini and Toyota, the Honda plant in Swindon is preparing for six days of closure as a result of this Brexit deal. Does she agree this is complete chaos and that the Government now need to end any opportunity for no deal?

Kirsty Blackman: It is complete chaos. It is ridiculous that businesses are having to prepare for a no deal because the Government continue to hold it over us, which is why Members on both sides of the House have signed a letter saying that a no-deal scenario is completely unacceptable. As has been said previously, opposition to no deal is one of the few things on which there is a majority in this House.

On the subject of free trade agreements, and on the subject of fantasy economics, the Government's paper on the deal scenario, the no-deal scenario and the analysis of Brexit costs talks about the potential for signing free trade agreements with the US, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, Brunei, China, India, Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain, plus rolling over all the FTAs on their current terms. The paper says that all the new free trade agreements will be signed on the basis of there being zero tariffs on everything in the scenarios that were modelled, and of all the FTAs being rolled over despite the bizarre assumptions that no sensible person would think are ever likely to happen. We are not going to have a free trade agreement with India with zero tariffs on everything within 15 years. That is absolutely not going to happen.

Despite all those bizarre assumptions, the UK Government still predict that our trade reduction will be 2.2%. So despite the most ambitious assumptions possible, which no realistic person would think could even vaguely happen, the Government still predict that our trade reduction will be 2.2% of GDP. I do not know how anyone who supports Brexit could stand up and

[*Kirsty Blackman*]

say that we will benefit from increased international trade when it is absolutely clear that we will not, even in the best possible scenario.

One of the things that the Secretary of State for International Trade is very good at is talking about the increase in our trade with countries like South Korea, with which we trade through the EU's free trade agreement.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech on the perils. I wonder whether the Chancellor would agree with a huge amount of what she says. It strikes me that the Scottish Government have outlined their economic analysis of what will happen, yet the UK Government have tried to keep their secret. Does my hon. Friend have any thoughts on why that is the case?

Kirsty Blackman: I think the UK Government are trying to say as little as possible about the economic analysis because they know that Brexit will damage the economy.

I am specifically focusing on the economy, but I will talk about other things in a few moments. Investors have pulled \$1.01 trillion out of UK equity funds since the 2016 referendum. That is an eye-wateringly large figure, and it comes as a direct result of the referendum according to Emerging Portfolio Fund Research, a data provider.

The Scottish Government have said that our GDP would be £9 billion lower under a free trade agreement—that is not under a no-deal scenario—than if we stayed in the EU. Amazingly, the figure is significantly more than even the most Unionist of commentators said that independence would cost the Scottish people. We are stuck with the UK, which is making terrible decisions and cutting more off our GDP than even those least in favour of independence said that independence would cut from our GDP.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a fantastic point. Is not the core of her argument that nobody, however they voted in the 2016 European referendum, voted to become poorer? That is all the more reason to put this to the people again in a people's vote so that folk can have their say now that they know what the consequences of Brexit actually are.

Kirsty Blackman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. People were told stories about unicorns and mermaids. They were told that there would be amazing economic largesse in the event of Brexit, and they have been told that for a huge number of years, and not just in relation to the Brexit vote. People have been told by politicians that those who choose to come to live and work in this country make us poorer, which is an absolute lie. Those people contribute to our GDP, they contribute to reducing our public sector net debt and they contribute to our economy, and that is without going into the cultural and social benefits.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is interesting to watch the faces of Conservative Members as my hon. Friend lays out, in stark detail, the impact on the economy. I have met Hologic, a life sciences company in my Livingston constituency that does diagnostic testing, a number of times since the Brexit vote, and it has

raised significant alarms. The company tests the safety of medicines for consumers not just in the UK but in the EU, and it has highlighted to me the catastrophic effect of the UK Government's plans. Does she agree that we are heading towards catastrophe if this Government continue going this way and their motion is passed?

Kirsty Blackman: My hon. Friend must have read my mind, because I was just about to move on to medicines. The Nuffield Trust has said:

“The longer term arrangements envisioned in the agreement and political declaration generally entail leaving the single market. Unless negotiating positions fundamentally change, this will produce extra costs for medicines and other supplies.”

Every single month 37 million packs of medicine travel from the EU to the UK, and 45 million packs of medicine travel from the UK to the EU. If we are outside the single market and the customs union, that medicine will take longer to travel across the border in both directions. That medicine will require extra testing in both jurisdictions. If we do not test it, when we are outside the single market and do not have a common rulebook, we would be putting individuals at risk by allowing them to use medicine that has not been tested and does not fit with our regime. A no-deal scenario would be disastrous and cannot be allowed to happen.

I wish briefly to mention a couple of things that will not be ready in the event of either a deal or no deal. I have mentioned the online system for those exporting from the EU to the UK via postal packages. It is important that the Treasury gets itself into gear and sorts this out. It promised to do so in a VAT notice that was put in place in August, but it needs to establish this online system so that individuals or companies exporting from the EU to the UK by post can do so. It was particularly telling that the International Trade Secretary talked about e-commerce, given that he proposes to take us out of the digital single market—that was unfortunate.

Let me move on to other things that are not ready. The postponement scheme for VAT does not appear to be ready, or if it is ready, companies do not how to use it. Again, the Treasury and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs need to get that scheme set up so that VAT that is changing from acquisition VAT to import VAT can be postponed, meaning that companies will not have to pay that money up front, because otherwise the situation will spell financial disaster for a huge number of companies.

Lastly, the customs declaration system is also not ready. It has not been widely rolled out—it has not been rolled out to everybody yet—but companies will have to use it. Some 145,000 companies have never exported outwith the EU and they will be reaching this system for the first time. It is important that they use it, and that everybody is able to use it before April so that any glitches in the system will be gone. It will not be a situation involving queues of lorries—we will not even be able to load the stuff on to lorries if this system does not work, so it needs to be fixed in advance.

I wish to talk a little more about the human cost. Last week, the British Retail Consortium announced more figures on the cost of food after Brexit. It has said that a no-deal scenario would see households in Scotland paying £55.30 more each week for food and that the least well-off 10% of households across the UK would be paying £38.50 more each week. That would represent

a 6.4% increase in the amount of their income that they would have to spend on food. Given the Government's squeeze on families at the bottom of the pile, it is incredibly important that the Government do what they can to ensure that no deal is taken off the table. I do not know why we are even still discussing this. Why is no deal still on the table? Why does the Prime Minister not just say that if her deal gets voted down tomorrow, which it will, she will not have no deal happen to us and that 6.4% increase for people will not take place.

I have not yet touched on migration. The 2017 Red Book said that reducing net migration by 20,000 would increase public sector net debt by 0.2% by 2022—that is a fact. Presumably the Government stand by the fact that it is a fact, because it was in their Red Book. People who choose to live and work in this country—on these islands—are net contributors to our economy. As a group, they are net contributors to our economy. They make a contribution, so we will be poorer—economically and fiscally—if net migration is reduced by any significant number. The hospitality sector needs 100,000 new EU entrants per annum—some people go away, so that is not a net figure. If we are to be a global Britain and a country that wants people to come to enjoy it as tourists, we need people to work in that sector. Given our ageing population in Scotland, we need people to come to live and work in our country even more. That is why the UK Government must change their plan on the £30,000 cap and the cap on numbers. If they are unwilling to do that, they must devolve immigration to Scotland. If they do not devolve immigration to Scotland, they make the case for Scottish independence ever stronger.

There are EU workers in our care, manufacturing and agri-food sectors, and those sectors rely on them. Today, NFU Scotland said:

“We cannot feed our nation without this labour.”

That is incredibly serious. If we do not have enough people coming to work in our agri-food sector, we will lose the ability to be the world-leading country that we are. We will lose the ability to feed even people who live here, let alone to export and to bring in the tax revenue that we get from exporting.

Free movement of people is a good thing—a brilliant thing. People my age and younger have benefited from it. We have been able to live and work in EU countries. People from those countries have been able to come to live and work next door to us, and we have benefited from that. It is devastating to think that this Government propose that my children should not benefit from the same rights of freedom of movement as we have had. I do not believe that any Member should reasonably be celebrating the end of freedom of movement, as its end costs us our rights and money in the Government's coffers. As the Archbishop of Canterbury said, proceeding with Brexit caused a moral issue, and the biggest place where that moral issue stands is that politicians—not all, but some—have done what they can to demonise immigration and people who are born in other countries. We would not be in the place we are today if that had not happened.

This situation is an absolute shambles. I was pleased to see that the Financial Secretary was in the Chamber earlier. I hope he managed to find some food, given the note he had saying “No food” and “No channel tunnel” when he left the earlier Cabinet meeting. I hope that those things are slight exaggerations, but given the increase in the cost of food in the event of no deal, no

food would be a reality for many families. We cannot operate like this. As the CBI said, businesses are watching in horror. The Prime Minister needs to remove the threat of no deal. The Government are limping on and the whole world is watching in horror. There is no good being done in this place just now. No other things are being done here—we are entirely focused on Brexit. We are not able to do the things that a global Britain should be doing. We are unable to have any kind of positive impact on the world because we are so unbelievably inward looking, fighting in this place.

The word “thrown” is used in the north-east of Scotland—it sounds slightly different depending on where you are in the north-east. Someone who is thrown is determined to proceed with something, in the face of all opposition and all sanity, and despite all evidence to the contrary and every expert telling them that they are wrong, because they have said they are going to do it. Someone who is thrown is trying to go through with it because they cannot bear going back on something they have said. I have said a number of times that the Prime Minister needs to remove the threat of no deal. When she comes to speak to us tomorrow, she needs to say that in the event that her deal is voted down, she will go to the EU to ask for an extension of article 50 in order for a people's vote to be held, so that we can remain in the EU and we will not have this economic, social and cultural catastrophe put upon us.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. A further 72 right hon. and hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye in tonight and tomorrow morning's debate, on account of which there will have to be, with immediate effect, a five-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches. I counsel colleagues that that limit will, in all likelihood, have to be reduced in due course.

8.38 pm

Joseph Johnson (Orpington) (Con): I had never rebelled against the Government before this month. I wish to use the brief time I have to set out four reasons why I shall vote against the deal tomorrow.

First, I believe that the Government are selling this package to the House on the false premise that we are somehow going to have a trade deal in place by the end of 2020. As Sir Nick Macpherson, the former permanent secretary to the Treasury, made clear last week in a tweet, that is a highly unlikely scenario. A deal even by the end of 2022—the possible period by the end of which we will have finished the transition period—is exceptionally unlikely. In his view, it is conceivable that we will have a deal in place by the mid-2020s. It really is, as the former permanent secretary to the Treasury said, “time for some honesty” from the Government. Forget all the flowery letters that have been exchanged today. Were the Government really being straight with the House and with the country, they would come clean and admit that we will have many years of the purgatory of the backstop ahead of us.

Secondly, any trade deal that we eventually strike will be worse for the economy than our current arrangements. As the Bank of England has noted, Brexit is a unique experiment. There is no precedent for an advanced economy anywhere in the world withdrawing from a trade agreement as deep and complex as the EU. Although

[Joseph Johnson]

it is not legally binding, the political declaration does set a direction of travel for the negotiations, reflecting the Prime Minister's red lines of ending freedom of movement and securing an independent UK trade policy. Those red lines necessarily mean that we have to leave the single market and any form of customs union, as foreshadowed by the Chequers White Paper. The political declaration accordingly prioritises "comprehensive arrangements" for goods, and scandalously neglects services, on which all we are aiming for is in effect bog-standard third-country market-access terms. We are fundamentally a services economy and our services sector is being thrown under a bus.

Let us take financial services—one of this country's few globally competitive sectors and one that is very important to many families in Orpington. The Centre for European Reform reckons that a free trade agreement would reduce financial services exports by almost 60%. The consultancy Oliver Wyman reckons that will mean a hit to the Treasury's revenues of around £10 billion. So much for the Brexit dividend.

Thirdly, this package leaves the deck heavily stacked against us in the negotiations that will come. The political declaration starts by giving the EU most of its goals on its strong point, which is goods exports, for which the EU had a surplus with us of £95 billion in 2017, but it offers very little to our crucial services sector, in which we had a surplus of around £28 billion. Given that we have necessarily already conceded the £39 billion financial settlement in the legally binding withdrawal agreement, we now have little leverage left with which to secure concessions from the EU in the months to follow. If the EU chooses to play hardball with us, it will simply let the UK enter the backstop in December 2022 then wait until our services sector pressures the Government into accepting a deal—any deal—that will remove the EU's feet from our windpipe and restore some measure of privileged market access to a sector that is so important to our economy.

Approval of this deal will lead to many years of excruciating trade negotiations—talks that will trigger waves of fury from Brexit campaigners and leave voters throughout the country at each inevitable UK concession on issues such as fisheries, Gibraltar and eventually, of course, freedom of movement itself. The package that the Prime Minister has negotiated simply sets us up to fail as a country. It is better that we all realise that now, before it is too late.

Finally, this deal is bad for our sovereignty. During the referendum, some implied that they were prepared to let Britain suffer economic damage in return for greater sovereignty and greater control. Of course, one of the great paradoxes is that the deal is remarkable in offering a double whammy: both economic harm and a loss of British sovereignty. That is one reason why many prominent Brexit campaigners are saying that this deal is worse than staying in the EU. There is now no single Cabinet position on what to do next, let alone one backed by the Conservative party or Parliament as a whole. Such is the farce that this has become that I believe we have no choice now but to go back to our constituents and ask them, reluctantly, to provide further guidance.

8.43 pm

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I hope the House will forgive me if I speak to the global context; after all, we are debating the European Union (Withdrawal) Act.

I come from the generation that was stung by Dean Acheson's saying in 1962:

"Great Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found a role."

I was lucky enough to get into the House when a generation was still here of people like Denis Healey and Ted Heath, who had actually fought on the beaches at Anzio and in the Normandy invasion against Hitler. Those people were still here. That generation had seen two world wars, and they created, not just in Britain, but across the western world, the United Nations, NATO and the European Coal and Steel Community that became an integrated Europe, and they did so to keep the peace, to keep the prosperity and to face up to the challenges of that global environment.

In my time in this House, I have seen that global environment becoming more challenging, more frightening and more terrifying. Indeed, it is the most terrifying time to be a Member of Parliament. We are responsible for looking after our constituents when their jobs are being undermined by different kinds of contracts and uncertainties, and when the old certainties are being swept away for us in the United Kingdom.

I believe passionately that our country has to be part of that global community and to be leading that global community. When we joined the European Union in 1975, it was thanks to the bravery of people such as Ted Heath who led the Conservative party and changed it from being anti-Europe to pro-Europe. His generation was one that, cross party, I admired. It produced a breed of politicians who, for their time, stepped up to the plate and showed that leadership.

What I am very concerned about is that we are now entering into an unknown world. Our withdrawal from the European Union has implications for our membership of the United Nations and there are questions over whether we will hold on to a seat on the Security Council and whether our impact or our force in the world will be very substantial at all. The fact of the matter is that we had found a new role in the world—as an active member and leader of the European Union. I judge this debate today on whether, as I want, our country is successful—successful in terms of meeting the challenges economically and meeting them politically. We can do that only through very close-co-operation across Europe in the European Union. That is why I cannot support anything that takes us out of the European Union. I campaigned to remain and I remain convinced that we should be in the European Union.

On a micro-level, on a bottom-up level, my sacred duty as a Member of Parliament is to come to this place to make sure that the health, welfare and prosperity of my constituents are not harmed in any way—that they are improved. Every piece of evidence that I have seen from the Bank of England, the London School of Economics, and the independent think-tanks convince me that I was right when, as Chairman of a Select Committee for 10 years, I believed that evidence-based policy was the best kind of policy. All the evidence

shows that my constituents, on any deal, will be worse off and poorer out of the European Union than in the European Union.

This deal does not deliver what we need or want. The Chancellor is looking at me carefully. He has criticised me in the past for synthetic passion. This is not synthetic, Chancellor. This is me with a heartfelt plea about our global position as a nation. I am speaking from a Parliament that should be representing the people from our constituencies. I do not want a poorer Britain. I do not want poorer constituents. This deal will deliver both those sad outcomes, and I urge the House to vote down the motion.

8.48 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): This deal simply does not deliver on the will of the people—it cannot do so mathematically. It is unwanted by the 48% who wanted to remain, and it is unloved by a very significant proportion of the loudest voices for leave. More importantly, it does not have the valid consent of the people. To give consent to an operation, people need to understand and have set out for them what the procedure involves, so that they can weigh up the risks and benefits. I am afraid that it is only now that we truly know what Brexit looks like out of the very many versions of Brexit that were presented during the referendum campaign. And I am afraid that it looks very far from the sunlit uplands with which we were presented at that time.

We cannot say that there is valid consent until people have had the opportunity to weigh up the risks and benefits of this deal—of Brexit reality—and we should take the time to pause in order to give them the chance to give that consent. The Secretary of State said that that would take a year, but that is not the case. This could be done in 24 weeks, and we know that the European Union is prepared to suspend article 50 to allow that process to go ahead. I do not agree with the often stated claim that this would somehow be a travesty that would somehow let down our democracy. Since when was democracy a single, one-off event? No one said it was a travesty when we had a further general election in 2017, just two years after the 2015 election. Surely the worst argument of all for refusing the British people the opportunity to give their valid consent would be to say that it might upset the far right—a group of thugs outside the gates of Parliament. Since when did this House give in to the demands of fascists?

We have heard powerful speeches by my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson) and the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) about the scale of the harms this deal will inflict on our constituents. All Members in this House have a duty to say it as it is. In an age of populism and fake news, we owe it to our constituents to tell them how it is and not to bow to that populism.

We should be very careful if we are going to ignore the very real concerns that have been set out regarding the conduct of the original referendum campaign—concerns that part of one of the biggest donations in British political history could have come as laundered money from abroad. We have also heard about the serious concerns and the fines imposed by the Electoral Commission for cheating; we are talking about more than half a million pounds diverted to support the murky activities of AggregateIQ. These are very serious

concerns. If, in the years to come, there is a public inquiry looking back on the conduct of the campaign, it will ask why those concerns were not taken more seriously at the time.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I know that my hon. Friend is a supporter of a second referendum, so let me take this opportunity to ask her what she believes the question would be in a second referendum.

Dr Wollaston: My hon. Friend makes a valid point, but the point is that if this House agreed to a referendum Bill, those decisions would be made by this House. My feeling is that it should be a choice between, “Is this what you meant by Brexit? Do you want to proceed on the terms of this deal—the only realistic deal on the table?” and “Do you want to remain?” It would be up to this House to decide whether a further option was included, but what would be wrong would be to deny people the opportunity to discuss that.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): But effectively the deal will be dead tomorrow, so the premise of the people’s vote will be dead tomorrow, leaving only a hard Brexit or revocation of article 50. That is what we are down to now.

Dr Wollaston: As it happens, I do not agree, but I do not think that any of us should pretend that it is for us, right now, to decide what the referendum question would be. We now know what the deal is. This is the only realistic deal on the table. It would be unconscionable for members of the Government to impose no deal. We have heard what the consequences of no deal would be, and I am afraid that they would be highly damaging for all the people we represent. It would not be damaging so much for big interests; it would be the most disadvantaged in our society who would pay the highest price.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: If Parliament voted down the deal tomorrow, the deal could be resurrected again for the people’s vote. That is a perplexing situation.

Dr Wollaston: If the deal does come back to this House—and once the Labour party has gone through its processology and is able to deliver on the wishes of its own members to back a people’s vote—then many former clinicians, including me, will be bringing forward an amendment to make it conditional on informed consent and obtaining that through a people’s vote. That would be the right thing to do, in recognition that, as we can all see, this House has reached an absolute impasse. That is the simple truth of the matter. There is no consent for any of the versions of Brexit. Now we have reached that point, absolutely the right thing to do, and the ethical thing to do, is to be honest about it and take the decision back to the people with a simple question: is this what you meant by Brexit or would you rather remain on the deal that we already have?

8.55 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): The result of the 2016 referendum left me absolutely devastated, but I hoped that we would be able to find a consensus for the way forward. It left me devastated because the whole backdrop to my adult life has been the positive internationalism that the European Union represented, for all its flaws. That stood in contrast to the history of depression and conflict that had scarred Europe for the

[Ms Karen Buck]

first half of the last century. In a new era of instability characterised by the behaviour of Putin and Trump, that hopeful internationalism seems to be even more important than it has been in recent decades. I regard the freedoms of the European Union, including the freedom of movement, as a triumph of modern politics—something that we should celebrate rather than fear. I understand the frustration at messy compromises and sclerotic decision making within the EU, but I fear that future trade negotiations will be characterised by many of the same frustrations and compromises on sovereignty.

I represent a constituency that not only voted overwhelmingly to remain but is one of the most diverse, international and outward-looking communities not just in Britain but probably in the world, and which has one of the highest proportions of EU nationals. It is an area of arrival that has, over centuries, accommodated waves of new communities, done so with extraordinary success, and helped to build a capital city and a country of creativity, cultural openness and economic success. Westminster, like London and many other parts of the country, has drawn on the contribution of EU nationals who have started businesses, contributed, and staffed our public services.

When my constituents write to me, as they do in their thousands, the overwhelming majority frame their arguments in those terms, often doing so with movingly personal stories of their lives not as separate communities but as husbands and wives, sons and daughters, fellow employees and business partners of British nationals. There is disappointment, anxiety and pain expressed every day, and bafflement as to how we could choose to close down rather than open up our options and our freedoms, and complicate our relations with our closest and largest trading partner.

It is also worth saying, because so often the remain argument is presented as one of middle-class affluence posited against the poorer communities that voted leave, that my constituency is the 15th poorest in the country on working-age poverty. Of course, I hear, as a result, the voices of some leavers too—the minority but none the less there. I agreed on one thing with the Secretary of State, which is that we should not patronise leave voters by saying that they did not know what they voted for. People did know what they voted for, but none the less a range of destinations was expressed in the leave vote.

That is why it is so important that, as the Brexit debate unfolds and the options have become clearer, we give people a further choice to express their opinions. Just as the EU was not responsible for many of the grievances that drove leave voters, leaving the EU will not rectify those grievances. Above all, it will not do so if this country is made poorer as a result—and it would be the poorest communities and individuals who had to carry the consequences of that.

There is no point in speculating about whether a different Government could have bridged the gulf. We can only deal with the reality of what we have. There is no point in speculating about whether the Government could have brought about a different outcome with more imagination, openness and generosity than they have shown over the last two years. That did not happen. It may have been possible early on to negotiate a

compromise built around the customs union and the single market, possibly with the Norway model, but that door has now shut.

We have only the deal in front of us, which is the start of an agonising process stretching as far as the eye can see. We have only a deal that is worse than membership of the EU and will leave us poorer, with reduced influence. I will not rule out any option to avoid the worst possible consequence, of crashing out with no deal, but I believe it is time to seek an extension of article 50 and put the decision back to the British people, so that we can hear their views.

9 pm

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The hundreds of constituents who have written to me demanding that I vote down this deal divide into two kinds: those who urge me to reject it so that we can leave the European Union without a deal—their preferred option—and those who urge me to reject it so that we can stay in the EU. They both cannot be right. There will have to be some management of expectations.

I have made my own dislike of this deal plain, and it is based largely on the fact that we do not know what we will be getting. The political declaration might deliver anything from Canada-minus to Chequers-plus, and where in that spectrum we might land depends upon the negotiations that will follow. There will be no end to the uncertainty for some time.

We have delivered ourselves into the weakest possible position during those negotiations, first by making the financial settlement up front, and secondly by abandoning one of the most important principles to any negotiating position—the ability to walk away—because we have agreed that we will agree and that we will stay in a state of limbo until that agreement is reached. Such is the toxic nature of that limbo that I fear we would probably agree to anything in order to avoid getting there in the first place.

I disagree passionately with my correspondents who say that this deal is worse than staying in the European Union. I have campaigned to leave since the referendum of 1975, and I am not prepared to see that opportunity lost. This deal is better than staying in the European Union. We will be out of the common fisheries policy, out of the common agricultural policy and out of the relentless momentum for political integration. I am very much aware that the events and votes of last week pose a present danger to Brexit, and I will have to consider carefully over the next 24 hours whether I want to share a Division Lobby with those who are there because their strategy is to prevent Brexit.

9.3 pm

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): It is good to follow the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne). I want to speak about a number of issues in relation to Northern Ireland. Members will be well aware of my party's position.

In February last year, I asked the Prime Minister a question that was referred to last Wednesday by the shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I said:

“I ask the Prime Minister to reinforce her earlier comments, given the imminent publication by the EU of the draft legal text arising from December's joint report. Will she confirm that she

will never agree to any trade borders between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom?”

The Prime Minister’s answer was:

“We continue to stand behind all the commitments that we made in December, and my negotiating team will work with the Commission to agree how they should be translated into legal form in the withdrawal agreement.”

Emma Little Pengelly: In line with what my hon. Friend has said, just after the Joint Report back in December 2017, I asked the Prime Minister in this Chamber whether, although the statement said that there would be unfettered access from Northern Ireland to GB, she could clarify for the House that there would also be absolutely unfettered access from Great Britain to Northern Ireland for goods, and she confirmed on the record of this House that that was the case. Yet we now have 68 pages in an annexe of further checks that would put a border within this United Kingdom and sever our single market.

David Simpson: My hon. Friend is correct.

I will continue with the Prime Minister’s answer:

“The hon. Gentleman is right: the draft legal text that the Commission has published would, if implemented, undermine the UK common market and threaten the constitutional integrity of the UK by creating a customs and regulatory border down the Irish sea, and no UK Prime Minister could ever agree to it. I will be making it crystal clear to President Juncker and others that we will never do so.—[*Official Report*, 28 February 2018; Vol. 636, c. 823.]

I do not know what happened from that time to now, but as we say in this country, we are where we are.

Northern Ireland and the people I represent in my constituency feel very despondent. They feel that they have been made the sacrificial lamb to placate the Irish Republic and the European Union. That is exactly how they feel. If we are to believe everything we read or everything we hear, EU officials have been quoted as saying that Northern Ireland is the “price” that the UK will pay for Brexit. I am a Unionist—and a proud Unionist—and I listen to some of the comments in the media and to the scaremongering from Ministers and Government officials when they go out to proclaim the doom and gloom, but my constituents are concerned about the Union of this Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Kevin Hollinrake: I guess the question I have for the hon. Gentleman is this: what is the alternative? Michel Barnier said on 11 October last year that, in the event of no deal, there would be checks at the border for all live animals and produce of animal origin. What effect would that have on Northern Ireland and on the integrity of the United Kingdom?

David Simpson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, but it is very interesting that, a week or 10 days ago, the papers released from the European Union and from the Republic of Ireland never mentioned the words “border checks” and never mentioned the land border in Northern Ireland. They mentioned the ports and the airports, but they did not mention this hard Brexit or this hard deal. We hear so often about this hard Brexit and this problem with the border. Who is going to implement this? The British Government have said they are not going to do it, the Irish Government have said they are not going to do it and the European Union is not going to do it, so who is going to enforce this hard border and this hard Brexit?

Kevin Hollinrake: Specifically, Ireland is part of the European Union, and the European Union has said very clearly that it would implement those checks at the border.

David Simpson: With the greatest respect to the hon. Gentleman, he has been long enough about this House to know that what the Europeans say and what they do are two different things. We have seen the history of the whole of the European Union, although when it comes to the midnight hour, things may change.

My constituents in the Upper Bann constituency voted to leave, and they are very clear that they want a deal, but they want the right deal for the best of the whole of the United Kingdom—and that is the bottom line. Certainly as it stands at this moment in time, I could not support this deal tomorrow, and neither can my party. I think that the way that the European Union has treated the fifth largest economy in the world is an insult, and I cannot support it.

9.10 pm

Boris Johnson (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con): I will be as brief as I possibly can be; these points must be made. When people around the world look at the debate that we have been having, there is one big question that they always ask me, and will particularly ask after the interventions that we have heard this afternoon. They ask, “Is Britain really going to leave?” Do we really have the courage and the self-belief to deliver what people voted for and seize the opportunities—independent, democratic self-government, real free trade deals, pioneering regulation that maximises the strengths of our economy, and an open and outward-looking economy that attracts people and investment from around the world on the basis of laws made in this country and not in Brussels? Are we really going to embrace that future, or are we going to be intimidated by the kind of speeches that we have heard this afternoon?

I fear that if we vote for this deal, we will be blatantly negating many of the potential benefits of Brexit, because as a result of the backstop trap, we will be faced with an unthinkable choice: sacrifice Northern Ireland, as we have just heard, or stay locked in the customs union and regulatory alignment, so that we cannot do free trade deals but remain rules takers and end up disgorging £39 billion for nothing in return, and without even the certainty that is claimed. As my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson)—my brother—rightly said, we have yet to begin the negotiations, and the only certainty is that the EU will keep us locked in the backstop until we comply with its wishes, and the whole debilitating wrangle will go on for years, which is why we have to get it right now.

The answer is not to have a second referendum. The answer is not to clamber back, or to attempt to clamber back, into the EU, because all this while it has been evolving in an ever more federalist direction. As we have been agonising about Brexit, it has been talking about more tax harmonisation and creating a Euro army—precisely the moves towards a United States of Europe that may attract some Opposition Members, but which have been decisively rejected by the British people and which are not right. We cannot go for the Norway option, for reasons that have been extensively chewed over in this House—we would end up taking even more rules from Brussels.

[Boris Johnson]

I do not think we can seriously contemplate delaying article 50, because after two and a half years of procrastination, the public would accuse us in this place of deliberately setting out to frustrate their wishes. They would conclude that there was some plot by the deep state to kill Brexit, and that is precisely—[*Interruption.*] That is what many people would conclude, and that is precisely why we cannot now treat the public as idiots and get snarled in delectable disputations about Standing Order No. 14, because they will see this stuff for what it is: public school debating society chicanery designed to get round their wishes.

If and when this deal is voted down, let us not continue to flog this dead horse. I am sure we are all grateful to Monsieur Juncker and Monsieur Barnier for the various comfort letters that they have provided, but we know that they are legally worthless. Instead of another fig leaf from Brussels, I hope that the Government will come back to this place with a plan that is in fact the Prime Minister's original plan, as it would go back to her principles outlined at Lancaster House, banking that which is sensible in the withdrawal agreement, scrapping the backstop, agreeing an implementation period in which to negotiate a zero-tariff, zero-quota free trade deal, holding back half the £39 billion at least until such a free trade deal is concluded, pledging what is obvious to all—that there is no plan, intention or need for a hard border in Northern Ireland—and getting on now, with zeal and enthusiasm, with preparations for no deal.

I am sure that whatever the bureaucratic, technical or logistical difficulties there may be, as Monsieur Puisseuseau of the Calais-Boulogne ports has pointed out, they can be overcome with a spirit of optimism and determination. That is the spirit we should now be applying to Brexit.

We can muff it. Yes, of course we can muff it. We can flunk it. We can vote for this deal, thereby confirming the worst suspicions of the British public about the cynicism of the elite, or else we can get it right and seize the opportunities before us. When we look ourselves in the mirror we can say that when this House came centre stage again, four years after we asked the British public to settle this profound question of their destiny, we did not miss our cue and we answered their request.

9.15 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): If this Brexit debate does not cover the bread and butter issues for my Blackpool constituents and for all our constituents—decent jobs, maintaining living standards, enough food on the table to feed their family—it will be for the birds. The truth is that they are already paying the price for the Prime Minister's botched negotiations. Her deal would make those bread and butter issues worse: there no safeguards over employment and environmental rights—unenforceable under her Brexit deal—and her last minute, panicked, fig leaf approach to our trade unions and Labour MPs will fool very few.

The Government's own statistics show the Prime Minister's deal reducing the size of the UK economy by at least 3.9%—a £100 billion hit compared with 2016, with jobs lost and growth stalled, a grim prospect for us in Blackpool and for other small towns; no Brexit

dividend for public services or the NHS, which that mendacious bus promised; and now the British Retail Consortium points out, as we have heard, that no deal could lead to price rises in Blackpool, for example, ranging from at least 9% to mid-20%. No one in my constituency voted to be worse off from this scenario or for the no deal she is already wasting millions of pounds on.

Our major north-west industries, such as BAE Systems and its ongoing supply chain, with hundreds of jobs in and around Blackpool dependent on them, would suffer from no deal. On top of that, the Government have failed to secure any deal beyond 2020 for the tens of millions of pounds and hundreds of jobs dependent on university research programmes within the EU. There are no opportunities for our students and apprentices to continue to benefit from the Erasmus programme, and an end to EU social and regeneration funding, which has benefited us strongly in the north-west. The universities closest to my constituency—Lancaster, Central Lancashire, Edge Hill and our own excellent Blackpool and the Fylde College—would be put in severe jeopardy.

It takes a rare sort of political genius to disappoint almost all sides of opinion across the United Kingdom, but by goodness the Prime Minister has managed it—everyone from the Mayor of London to the Democratic Unionist party. Instead of reaching out to heal the scars and divisions of failed austerity, she has been obsessed by the divisions in her own party. The huge irony is that her deal is now unwanted by two out of three Tory party members. Not since Chamberlain went to meet Hitler at Munich and came back waving a piece of paper saying “Peace in our time” has a British Prime Minister had so inept or ignoble a conclusion to negotiations.

This deal undermines the aspirations of the young and the security of the old. It has let down our NATO friends and allies in central Europe and the Baltics, when this country supported them so strongly to access a democratic 21st century Europe. And then there is the future of peace and prosperity in Ireland. The Prime Minister's failings over the backstop and other elements have stirred up suspicion on all sides. It is no surprise the DUP fears being shunted into an endless groundhog day on the backstop. The Government's bungling threatens to undermine the Good Friday agreement. Have we so soon forgotten the terrible price the whole of the UK and the communities of Northern Ireland paid through the troubles? As a young man, I remember the Birmingham bombings, hearing a bomb going off round the corner from my London office, and a press trip to Northern Ireland being cut short by worried checkpoint guards after the murder of two British corporals in Andersonstown. Given all that suffering, how could this Prime Minister take a chance that jeopardises the Good Friday agreement?

The Prime Minister talks up global Britain, but as a result of her bungling must we end up, instead of being a linchpin for Europe between our allies, north America and the Commonwealth with all the soft power that gives us, being reduced to being an offshore island with her deal that satisfies no one's aspirations? This has come about because she lacked the leadership or ability to look through the other end of the telescope, a similar failure to that which led the Roman historian Tacitus to put into the mouth of a Scottish chieftain the bitter words:

“They make a desert and call it peace.”

That is what she will create if her deal is accepted: a desert for those who want Brexit to be a new start, but also for those who wish to reform the EU; a desert for those on all sides of the House proud of our international achievements; and a desert of sterility to which we shall be chained for years to come.

I accept that the Prime Minister has displayed stamina in pursuing her deal, but that does not compensate for the lack of foresight or empathy. As one of her own MPs told her, stamina is no substitute for strategy, but so boxed in has she become that she is convinced she is some form of 21st-century Joan of Arc, hearing voices instructing her what to do. She is not Joan of Arc, however. She has not heard heavenly voices, and if she is walking to a Brexit stake, it is one of her own construction. If she cannot see that, this House should remember another occasion when the national interest overrode a Prime Minister, when Leo Amery challenged Neville Chamberlain by quoting Oliver Cromwell's words:

"You have sat here too long for any good you have been doing...In the name of God, go."

9.20 pm

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): There are two particular matters that I would like to raise. First, I will refer to the vast international opportunities that await our nation if we deliver Brexit. Secondly, I will touch on what I see as the responsibility of all Members of this House to ensure that we grasp those opportunities.

I am in no doubt that a great future awaits the United Kingdom after we have left the EU. I saw that myself when I led a trade mission to Nigeria at the end of 2017. Being the country of my father's birth, Nigeria is very close to my heart, but it is also a nation of huge opportunity, rich in history and culture with vibrant and charismatic people. It also has a growing service industry and manufacturing sectors. While there, I had numerous meetings with large and small businesses, Government Departments and agencies. They all expressed a massive willingness to do more and huge excitement about the opportunities that Brexit will bring, allowing our two nations to trade more closely. It was a glimpse of global Britain in action, spreading the rule of law, boosting prosperity, sharing our expertise and engaging fully with Commonwealth friends and international partners.

Grasping those opportunities as we leave the EU is not inevitable, however. Our future success is not a given. It will require effort and spirit from us all. Such effort and spirit should be burning brightly like a beacon in this Chamber right here and now, but it is not. On day one back in Parliament last Monday, colleagues returned to ugly discord in this House and on the streets surrounding it. My right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) was subjected to abuse and harassment by a mob outside on College Green. The night ended with a viewing of the Channel 4 production, "Brexit: The Uncivil War". That title says it all. It was a reminder of the horrible referendum campaign and how the tactics of both sides whipped up dangerous anger and division.

This week, we have a chance to stop the madness. We must be more respectful towards each other. We have got to work harder to be more understanding of different viewpoints. I regret the fact that pragmatism and compromise seem to have become dirty words. In fact,

they are crucial ingredients to success. For those of us who have spent significant periods of time in the outside world prior to entering politics, compromise is perhaps more highly valued. In any negotiation where there is a reasonable balance of bargaining power, no one ever gets everything they want when they want it, and it is our duty and responsibility as parliamentarians to find the solution to the Brexit deadlock. We were elected to find answers to difficult problems and to make difficult decisions in the best interests of our country. We cannot shirk the issue and we cannot avoid it; we have to play the hand we have been dealt.

The answer is not a second referendum with ghastly division and uncertainty, and the answer is not no deal, which threatens to bring havoc to so many. The answer is certainly not kicking this most important of cans ever further down the road. The nation needs us to stand up and deliver and really be together. We owe it to the electorate, who we will be failing if we fail to do that. The answer, therefore, has to be a compromise solution—a solution that honours the referendum result by providing greater control over our borders, laws and money, a solution that preserves our economic and security partnerships with the EU, a solution that delivers for all our constituents. Despite the obvious imperfections, the withdrawal agreement on the table delivers for this country, and, for that reason, I will vote for it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before I call the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), I must point out what some Members will have noticed—namely that, most unfortunately, the timer display to my right is not functioning, which is gravely to the disadvantage of Opposition Members. I have been advised, I am afraid, that it cannot be repaired while the House is sitting, so I would encourage Members to—

Greg Hands: Come over here.

Mr Speaker: No, not to cross the Floor of the House—it was a nice try by the right hon. Gentleman, and I do not blame him for making the attempt, although whether they will be inspired by the prospect of sitting near him is a matter for legitimate speculation and conjecture. I was saying that Members should try to take account of exactly when they started speaking, and they may be assisted by their Whip as well. I know that it is imperfect, and I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman has kept his sense of humour at this time of night, but we will have to keep going to the best of our ability.

9.25 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Last year, we commemorated the centenary of the end of the first world war. It was a sombre remembrance. Last month, we celebrated 100 years since the first election in which women and working-class men voted. Both anniversaries remind us of the progress we have made, but progress is not inevitable. This year, we remember 80 years since the outbreak of the second world war—just 21 years after the war to end all wars. It is a shocking reminder of the fragility of peace. The last 70 years have been ones of peace, freedom and prosperity driven by positive relationships with our partners in Europe. The 70 years before were ones of war, oppression and economic depression driven by negative relationships with our

[*Nic Dakin*]

European neighbours. Peace, freedom, prosperity—things worth having, things we take for granted when we have them but whose loss we regret when they are gone.

We had a second referendum on our relationship with the EU in 2016. Many in this debate have reminded us of its outcome—17.4 million, or 52%, for leave and 16.1 million, or 48%, for remain—but there is another way of looking at the result that helps to explain why we are finding it so difficult to deliver the will of the British people: 62% of eligible voters, or 29 million people, did not vote leave. No wonder we are struggling! People voted to come out, not to lose out.

Northern English industrial, commuter and market towns such as Scunthorpe, Bottesford and Kirton, which I represent, voted overwhelmingly leave—2:1 in my area—and it is no wonder. They are fed up with the change to their communities, as migrant workers take jobs in agriculture, food production and small manufacturing. They see this as depressing their wages. They see their high streets change and shrink. When things close—the courts, the banks, the shops—it always seems to be ours that close. When investment is made—in roads, in rail, in shiny new projects—it always seems to be the big cities, London and the south-east that benefit.

Communities such as the ones I represent are right to feel neglected because they are, despite our best efforts. There is a growth in the number of those just about managing and people using food banks. We saw that over Christmas. There are cuts to real incomes and welfare support as a result of the ideological pursuit of austerity. We used to sing that things could only get better. At the referendum, people said things could not get much worse. They wanted change and to take back control, and they still want that. They want to be listened to, they want their NHS to deliver consistently for them, they want to see their schools funded properly and they want to see investment in local jobs, and they are right to want these things.

Brexit is the magic bullet that'll do the trick—fingers crossed! We are told that Brexit means Brexit and that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed—meaningless drivel! Like the Emperor's new clothes, it looks wonderful until you see through it, and that is where we are now—the point at which the clothes are properly looked at and the Prime Minister's deal properly examined. Pretty much nobody likes it. That is what my email traffic says. British Steel, the largest local private sector employer, is desperate for certainty, horrified at the prospect of no deal and urging me to vote for the Prime Minister's deal, but there is little support for this. Although the deal would get us over the current bump in the road, it would not be long before the other bumps and new uncertainties came into view. That is the problem.

The PM has not listened to the people. In 2017, she asked for a larger majority to push through a hard Brexit and the people said, "No thank you!" Afterwards, she should have reached out to all the Opposition parties, not just the Democratic Unionist party, in the interests of national unity to find a way forward. Instead, she has dug into her bunker, behaving as though she has a huge majority even though she leads a minority Government. That is what has got us to today: a Government of headless chickens running round in ever-decreasing circles of Dante's "Inferno".

We need to protect the Union of the United Kingdom by preserving the Good Friday agreement. We need to be in a customs union and have access to the single market while restricting freedom of movement. We need to listen to the 62% as well as the 52% and take positive action to address regional inequalities. If we do that, the next 70 years will build on the legacy of peace, freedom and prosperity of the last 70 years through strong and positive relationships with our European neighbours and the rest of the world.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am afraid that the limit has to be reduced to four minutes.

9.31 pm

Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con): I am grateful to be able to speak in this historic debate before what will be one of the most important votes of my career, if not my lifetime. It brings me no pleasure whatever to make this speech: I have never rebelled against the Conservative party and I have never taken a stance against my leader. But my duty to my constituents and my contract with the nation mean that I must speak frankly and vote with my conscience against this deal. It is the reason why I resigned as a Minister from the Department for Exiting the European Union in November.

The simple truth is that this deal is not Brexit. It is neither what a majority of voters in Fareham voted for in the referendum nor what 80% of voters backed at the general election. But we are being told that, yes, it does honour the referendum and take back control of our laws, our money and our borders. Call me a pesky lawyer, but that does not stand up to scrutiny. I have been called worse: a jihadi, an extremist, a racist. Most recently, I was referred to—by, it has to be said, my very good friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—as a swinger at a party waiting for Pierce Brosnan to arrive. Mr Speaker, you will know that I got married about a year ago; I have to inform you that our relationship is going well and we have not quite got to that point.

The legal reality is very different from the slogans. The deal continues our subjugation to EU laws during the implementation period and the backstop: the UK will have no say whatever on those rules and regulations. After the backstop, we have no guarantee whatever that the UK will be able to diverge. The jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice will persist thereafter and our courts will not have the final say on many matters.

There have been pledges to end the free movement of people, but I do not believe that they stand up to scrutiny either. After exit day in March 2019, the free movement directive and its principles will substantially continue to apply. We have no promise, again, that free movement will categorically end after the implementation period—merely the promise of a labour mobility agreement. Mr Speaker, if you know what that means I would be grateful to hear your thoughts. I certainly do not—and that is after having worked for a year at the Brexit Department.

After we technically leave the EU in March, we will be legally bound to pay £39 billion for many years thereafter. For what? Nothing. We have failed to secure any guarantee that we will get a free trade agreement in return for the very large price we are paying.

My parents emigrated to the UK from Kenya and Mauritius in the 1960s. They were born under the British empire and admired the United Kingdom. The UK that inspired them was confident in the world—pioneering in statecraft, and fearless in the face of adversity: a Britain that led the way for others and contributed so much good to the world. That is the vision of Britain that I have inherited, and in which I profoundly believe. At this crossroads in our history, we are being fed a diet of doom and pessimism—a choice between surrender and catastrophe—but our nation is greater than that. We can salvage Brexit before it is too late. We can ditch this deal: we can honour the British people for our great nation.

9.35 pm

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): I have received hundreds of emails, letters and calls from constituents over just the last few weeks, as other Members on both sides of the House will have done. Some have been from people engaging with their Member of Parliament for the very first time. That is at least one positive thing to have emerged from the last two and a half years of chaos, but I find it sad that people are becoming engaged in politics through anger, disbelief and frustration rather than through hope or positive change.

A large number of my constituents have urged me to vote against the deal. They think that it pleases no one. It does not protect jobs or the economy, it does not preserve key protections and rights at work, it is bad for the environment and for consumers, and it is bad for standards for our food, our health and our safety. It puts our country's future and prosperity at stake. One of my constituents recently told me:

“What I think is immoral, is the idea that somehow British people have given their consent to a process that will cause huge economic hardship to large sections of the population.”

I agree with him. We have a critical responsibility in this place, not least to the poorest and most marginalised in our society, to protect our economy and public services. However, that does not mean telling people that their choice was wrong. We need to look at the reasons why people voted as they did, explore the root of those problems, and then work to secure genuine change for people while protecting them and respecting their choice at the same time. That is their duty, as was highlighted perfectly by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner).

A number of constituents have also expressed concern about the rights of EU citizens. People who have contributed so much to this country are feeling unwelcome, and some have left as a result. A local business told me:

“We employ skilled engineers from around the world and see dangers ahead if we close our doors”.

The Government's proposed immigration policy measures skill, and therefore visa type, by pay level. Given that those involved in research and technology are often highly skilled but poorly paid, that is not fair.

The Tories say that they have given clarity to EU nationals, but my European constituents do not agree. One told me, “I am worried about my future”, saying:

“As an EU national who has lived in Scotland for over thirty years... I feel that the explanations as to what 'settled status' entails in practice have been lacking in clarity”.

The Prime Minister must think again and do better by people who are have worked here, lived here and contributed so much.

In many ways, this deal would undermine opportunities for young—especially working-class—people. Youth services in the UK have been disproportionately slashed, and have experienced the impacts of austerity over the last eight years. Over that time, EU funding has significantly helped to plug gaps, but there is a real lack of provision to protect those funds. The findings of a panel of young people in Scotland brought together by the organisations Children in Scotland and Together raised the need for continued contribution to Erasmus with an extra grant, and the need for workers' rights to be protected. It seems to me that young people have a clearer view than the Government about what we need as a country.

We cannot have a no-deal Brexit—we absolutely cannot—but we also cannot be held to ransom and forced into choosing a bad deal. Labour is the only party that is trying to heal the divisions in our deeply divided country. In contrast, the Government have only made those divisions worse. Brexit has shaken the establishment. We need to listen to what people are telling us, but we also need to protect them, and to protect and restore public services and our communities. On behalf of the people of Midlothian, I will not be voting for this deal.

9.39 pm

Dr Phillip Lee (Bracknell) (Con): The task before Members of this House is simple: we must deal with reality not fantasy; we must be honest with ourselves and our constituents; we must decide to lead, not be led; and, above all, we must each make judgments about what is in the best interests of our constituencies and our country without fear or favour. The issue at hand is too important to do otherwise.

I cannot vote for this withdrawal agreement for many reasons, but this evening I will concentrate on just one: neither this Brexit nor any other practical form of it measures up to what was promised in 2016. The fact is that people voted to leave because they were told that by doing so the country would be richer. They were told about £350 million for the NHS, easy access to the single market and easy, deliverable trade deals with the rest of the world. They were told that there would be less immigration, specifically fewer Muslims, as evidenced by the use of a false position on Turkey in the accession process. Finally, they were told that they would regain sovereignty.

I have not been even remotely persuaded that any of these Vote Leave promises have been shown to be deliverable, and neither have an increasing number of my constituents, if recent sophisticated polling is to be believed. Also, I am convinced that our countrymen and women chose leave without really knowing many of the implications. To be honest, I was one of them. I was one of those ignorant people who did not understand the implications, and I point Members to our lack of membership of the European Medicines Agency and the impact that would have on access to new drugs.

If we had gone out and said to the public, “Vote for this deal,” do we really know for sure what the result would have been? I suspect our people would have been less than enthusiastic. In fact, I suggest that the response would have been, “Up yours,” and rightly so. That is why I strongly believe that it would be a supreme act of political fraud to proceed with any practical or legally deliverable form of Brexit without first getting the

[Dr Phillip Lee]

legitimacy of public consent. Hence I want no part in this act of self-serving political chicanery, or indeed any other future attempts to deliver softer forms of Brexit.

This deal does not do it for me. However, neither does so-called Norway-plus. Norway does not control its borders, Norway pays into EU programmes and Norway is not at the table when the rules are drawn up. Hands up those who think that not controlling immigration or regulations, and paying for the pleasure, was what won the referendum for Vote Leave? For any responsible parliamentarian to contemplate supporting a no-deal Brexit without giving ourselves at least a decade to adjust to that reality is beyond reckless.

Dr Wollaston: Does my hon. Friend think that any responsible Government could in all conscience inflict no deal on their people?

Dr Lee: No, I do not, to be blunt.

There is only one way out of our mess: ask the people to decide and have the final say, and, unlike in 2016, give a choice between two legally and practically deliverable options. It is to say, “We know you wanted to leave and we respect that. However, leaving means this—is that okay?” This time, there should be no tortuous process of subsequently trying to interpret a result. This time, there should be a decision that will be acted on within 24 hours of the result. The clinical equivalent would be to say, “I know you wanted an operation, but having done some further tests, we’ve now realised there is a significant risk that you will be harmed. Do you still want it?”

The Government have clearly worked hard to respect the 2016 referendum vote and to deliver a workable Brexit, but their mandate is exhausted. They need the legitimacy of a new vote. In response to the argument of some colleagues, it is not true to say that the public will never forgive us if we do not deliver Brexit, but it is certainly the case that if we deliver a bad deal, the public should never forgive us. If the public vote for this Brexit, fine, but I am not voting for it, because there has not been informed consent to it, it is not in my constituents’ interests and it is not in my country’s best interests.

9.44 pm

Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister, in interpreting the outcome of the referendum and handling negotiations with the EU, has fought to keep everyone in the dark for most of the past two years. It was only late on in the process, when beginning to look at negotiating the withdrawal agreement, that she came forward with the so-called Chequers plan. The plan was clearly meant to strike a balance between what her Brexiteer Back Benchers would accept and what she felt she could successfully negotiate with the European Union. The final outcome clearly satisfies the latter—hence the deal, which has enraged a large proportion of her own party and certainly the vast majority of Opposition Members, who want a much closer economic and political relationship with the EU. That is not currently on offer.

If the Prime Minister had sought to engage with Parliament over the past two years rather than simply saying what she felt the referendum meant to her, and if she had informed Parliament towards the end about what she was doing, we would not be in the mess we are

in today. Any progress on this matter will require consensus across the House, and not the take-it-or-leave-it approach amounting to blackmail that the Prime Minister is trying to pursue. The political declaration following the withdrawal agreement is deficient in terms of its commitment to the UK and the single market, and it also contains no mention of the customs union. To vote for this deal tomorrow would be to approve an approach to the negotiation of a trade deal in which the likely outcome with regard to the single market is unknown and in which the customs union has clearly been ruled out. This is clearly leading to a hard Brexit.

As other Members have said, the clock is running down and we have little time to come up with an alternative before 29 March. It is therefore essential that the Government seek an extension to article 50 to give us more time or, if necessary, even revoke article 50 until Parliament or the people of this country have finally decided what sort of an arrangement with the European Union this country should have. The people of this country who voted in the referendum in June 2016 could not have known all the consequences of their vote at the time, or the likely impact on jobs and prosperity in this country. Any politicians who tried to warn them of this were described as scaremongers or pursuers of “Project Fear”. Much of what the remain campaign said at the time has either become true—including a heavily devalued pound, the flight of capital from the country and job losses in key industries—or it is on the way to becoming true, should we leave on 29 March.

When the Prime Minister’s deal is rejected at the end of this debate tomorrow evening, we will be in a situation in which, in the past, a Prime Minister would have considered resigning or calling a general election. I do not expect either of those events to take place, because this Prime Minister’s track record is one of stubbornness and disregard. However, I do expect her to come forward sometime soon after with her plan B, which must include either the extension or revocation of article 50. In addition, there must be a genuine attempt to involve Parliament in finding a way forward that can form the basis of further discussions with the European Union around realistic arrangements for UK access to the single market and membership of a customs union. The European Union has said that this deal is the final deal and it will not negotiate another one, but it would say that, wouldn’t it? If Parliament can come to a consensus and the Prime Minister can respect that consensus, the EU must give serious consideration to that consensus. The Prime Minister should continue to work on that basis. If she cannot do so, she should call a general election and let the people decide.

9.48 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I want to speak about the exercise of political authority, the character of entitlement and the nature of expectations. Political power has one virtuous object: the defence and welfare of the people, and the advancement of their interests. For that to be true in practice, the exercise of power must be accountable. The European Union is esoteric, obtuse and obscure, so far as most of our constituents are concerned—they neither hold people to account nor understand how it works. I barely understand it myself, even after all those years in government. What I do know is that in every single Government Department in which I served, at some

point a civil servant would come to me and say, “It’s bad news! There is a directive from Europe. How can we get round it? How can we get out of it? How can we dilute it?” Never did anyone come to me to say, “This has arrived from the European Union and it is good news for Britain.” Because the British people knew that, they voted to leave.

There are those in this place who have a deep sense of entitlement. They believe that they were born to rule. More than that, they believe that they are entitled to dictate the views of all those around them and to proscribe views that do not fit in with their globalist, liberal establishment preoccupations. They neither understand the British people nor truly care about them. They are determined to frustrate Brexit and to use every process to corrupt every possible method to do so. We must stand in their way: for the people against that liberal establishment.

I know that the Prime Minister has done her best. I am not one of those who thinks that she has failed, but she must do more. She has the national interest at heart, but the backstop cannot be sustainable, and the reason is straightforward—it could continue in perpetuity. It could create a contractual, treaty-based relationship with the European Union that we could not get out of even if this Parliament believed that it was in our national interest. The Attorney General told us so in December when he said:

“There is therefore no unilateral right for either party to terminate this arrangement. This means that if no superseding agreement can be reached within the implementation period, the protocol would be activated and in international law would subsist even if negotiations had broken down.”—[*Official Report*, 3 December 2018; Vol. 650, c. 547.]

That brings me to my third and final point. We now stand ready to deliver the expectations of the British people or to frustrate them. Our power in this place and power in government arise from the legitimacy conferred on us by those people who elect us and to whom we answer. If we frustrate them and let them down, I would be reminded of the words of Benjamin Disraeli, who said:

“Duty cannot exist without faith”,

and if we breach the faith of the British people in our integrity, we will do a disservice not only to this Parliament at this time, but to our very democratic system of government. I am not prepared to do that, and I know that Members across the Chamber are not prepared to do that, so I ask all my colleagues—wisdom does not reside on one side of the House or the other, by the way—to live up to what the people ask us to do. Do not support the deal tomorrow night, but back Brexit and ensure that we leave the EU lock, stock and barrel.

9.52 pm

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): There was nothing inevitable about reaching this impasse. In reality, the Brexit we have before us in this deal is the Prime Minister’s creation and hers alone. The Prime Minister’s approach to the Herculean task of negotiating Brexit has been astoundingly out of touch with the needs of both Parliament and the public. The crucial first step of when and how to trigger article 50 hardwired acrimony into Brexit from the outset—acrimony between Parliament and the Executive and within and between the communities we represent. It set us on a course on which failure to

command a majority within Parliament or among the public was inevitable. The Government spent £10 million of public money going all the way to the Supreme Court to stop us in Parliament having a say on the triggering of article 50. Do we imagine, had the Prime Minister won that case, that her intentions were to be more inclusive of Parliament, to be more consultative, or to be more driven to listen, learn and engage? Of course not.

I voted against triggering article 50 because there was no evidence that the Government were prepared for the negotiations—and they were not. What followed was 18 months of negotiations within the Tory party, all the while pretending that that had the same effect as negotiating with our partners in the EU. There was no Chequers moment for the EU, because its negotiating principles were signed off by all 27 nations, the European Parliament and the European Commission three months after article 50 was triggered. Our Government—the ones who started this process—spent three quarters of the negotiating time rowing among themselves. The Prime Minister survived every row by telling each side exactly what they wanted to hear and never putting anything in writing. It is an unholy coalition held together by smoke and mirrors, so it was no surprise that the wheels came off the moment she published her deal in legally binding text. It need not have been that way.

When the Prime Minister took office, giving that remarkable first speech on the steps of Downing Street, she had the opportunity of a lifetime to reconcile our country and heal our politics. She could have toured our nations to listen to people from all areas and all backgrounds. She could have established ways to include the public in solving the Brexit challenge.

The Prime Minister said that she pulled the vote at the last minute because she had listened to this House and needed to rework the backstop, but even that fails the truth test. If she had truly listened to this House, she would have heard that concerns about security were raised more frequently than the backstop, as were immigration and citizens’ rights. And the most heavily mentioned concern in those debates, raised three times as often as the backstop, were economic security and trade. What has she done to deliver on what Members demanded last time? Nothing. Another wasted month of precious article 50 time.

The Prime Minister says we must not let the great be the enemy of the good when it comes to a Brexit deal, and there we have it. With this deal, she has literally taken the “great” out of Great Britain. There is no plan B to unite the House if the motion fails to secure agreement tomorrow. The very fact that no single option has galvanised a majority in this place is the perfect guide as to whom we should turn to help solve it. The Government may be paralysed and Parliament gridlocked. It is time we turned outwards to ask the people to guide us on the way forward.

On the steps of Downing Street, upon taking office, the Prime Minister told the nation that her Government

“will do everything we can to give you more control over your lives.”

If now is not the moment to make good on that promise, when is?

9.56 pm

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), who voted against article 50 and is in a stronger position than his Front Bench. It is also a pleasure to follow hot on the heels of my neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes).

My constituency, like the constituencies of my right hon. Friends the Members for South Holland and The Deepings and for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), voted overwhelmingly to leave—68% on a massive turnout. I voted leave myself, and I stood at the last election on a pledge to honour the referendum. I think it is my duty to deliver on that pledge.

Would I prefer a perfect, clean Brexit with no backstop, no ongoing role for the ECJ and a chance to break away in one swoop? Yes, of course I would. I was in my constituency a lot before Christmas and, like my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), I had many conversations with constituents. I was struck by how much support and respect there is for the Prime Minister and her tenacity and determination in difficult circumstances.

One chap said to me, “Henry, would you like a 100% Brexit?” And I said, “Of course I would. I voted for Brexit. Wouldn’t you like a 100% Brexit?” He said, “Yes, I would, but we actually got 52%, so it was always going to be a compromise.” After 46 years of ever-closer integration, after spending 10 years negotiating our entry into the EU, a 100% Brexit was never a realistic expectation.

The agreement before us is the result of many months of incredibly diligent work. Yes, it is easy to criticise a lot of it, and I am far from satisfied, but if one looks at some of the plus points in the agreement, 80% of the key elements on research, skills, education, cultural links, citizenship, security and intelligence were agreed with little fuss as a result of our negotiating team.

I do not accept the idea that the EU is somehow indifferent to the outcome of this agreement and whether it gets through the House. If it fails, the EU would see it as an appalling indictment of EU diplomacy, having put so much into it. As my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West points out, the agreement stops the vast payment, closes down free movement and gives us control again of our fisheries and agriculture, and we will no longer be bound to implement future EU legislation. Above all else, it gives us a crucial stepping-stone to the next stage, which is the most important part of all—our future trade agreements and the future political relationship. Frankly, if I had been offered this agreement in 2016, when I campaigned with my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings and many other colleagues during the referendum, I would have taken it.

Unfortunately, this is not a binary choice between this deal and a no-deal Brexit. I could live with a no-deal Brexit, but I am concerned that we have not properly prepared for it and that it could lead to a constitutional stand-off between the Government and Parliament. A second referendum would be a complete disaster. People would say to us, “We voted in the referendum, at your request. We then spoke and we asked you to implement it. You then asked us again at

the last election and 82% of you campaigned on a platform to implement the result, and now you are coming back to us to ask us again.”

I am going to vote reluctantly for this agreement tomorrow night, but I am also reminded of what a lot of constituents have said to me—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has the benefit of the clock. I am sorry to stop him, because I enjoy listening to him.

10 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): In May, I gave a speech in this place calling on the Government to put aside their differences and their rigid ideologies, overcome their stubbornness and focus on what matters: a deal that works for people, families and businesses in the west midlands and across the country. It is clear that what this Government have put in front of us does not do that. This deal presents a threat to the three universities in my constituency; across the west midlands, we attract more than 8,000 students from the EU each year and employ about 5,000 academics who are EU citizens. The universities in my constituency are concerned about the impacts of this deal. What does it do to their ability to attract students and staff, and to their continued ability to collaborate with other institutions in Europe? This deal does not answer those questions.

Having spoken about those universities, I am pleased to reference the report ‘The NHS and Health Law Post Brexit’, written by the academic group The UK in a Changing Europe’, which includes researchers from the University of Birmingham. The report was launched in Parliament in December 2018. So what does this Brexit deal mean for the NHS? The report raises fears about the likelihood of medicine shortages taking place across the UK and its authors are rightly worried about the lack of a guarantee of continued access to European Union-wide public health networks and vigilance systems which facilitate the protection of patient safety. The Government have not adequately addressed any of those things, and the damaging effect of this deal on the NHS will be felt around the country if it goes through.

According to analysis commissioned by Birmingham City Council’s Brexit commission, one in 10 registered nurses in the west midlands is from the European Union. In a sector that already has a high level of vacancies and a low retention of nursing staff, they fulfil vital roles, working in older adult nursing homes, and providing help and support for some of our most vulnerable citizens. I ask for a guarantee from Ministers that those so called “low skilled” or “unskilled” workers will still be able to come from the EU.

Despite the much delayed White Paper, which finally slipped out just before Christmas, we still have a Cabinet and Government at odds over their future immigration policy. So let me say that blindly following an ideological desire to severely cut EU migration will damage our economy and leave vulnerable industries, already heavily hit with large numbers of vacancies, like social care, even closer to breaking point. Charities and civil society groups have come to me worried about the Government’s intentions of replacing the EU structural and investment funds with a shared prosperity fund. The lack of detail, coupled with indications and rumours about how the funds will be distributed, is worrying, and these vital

organisations are hesitant about planning for the medium and long term. This anxiety about the future is also true of these organisations and aid agencies based in the UK but operating abroad. They are already experiencing the impact of the Government's lack of clarity over Brexit, with currency fluctuations resulting in funding shortfalls for overseas work. There are also serious threats to their future programmes and jobs that this Government have not addressed.

The Greater Birmingham chamber of commerce evidence showed that almost a quarter of west midlands-based businesses export exclusively to the EU. These businesses need continued access to the EU, and this deal does not guarantee this. Meanwhile, small and medium-sized enterprises have already experienced problems as a result of the failure of the Government's negotiations. According to the Federation of Small Businesses, one in five small businesses employs someone from the EU and seven in 10 small employers rely on mid or low-skilled staff, so there is a real danger of Brexit making the current skills gap much worse. These SMEs do not trust this Government to get it right; according to the research done by Ed Balls and Peter Sands, they are

“deeply dissatisfied that this was the choice they were being offered”.

That is because the deal does not

“provide the detail, certainty, and guaranteed future proximity to the EU that most businesses want.”

Just last week, we witnessed the negative effect that the Government's mishandling of Brexit is having on businesses in the west midlands, with Jaguar Land Rover's announcement that further job cuts are expected. It cites post-Brexit uncertainty and a lack of clarity as one of the reasons for these proposed redundancies. This is a serious concern for many of my constituents who are employed by Jaguar Land Rover and also for the region as a whole.

10.4 pm

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Representing a constituency that voted mostly remain, but having voted leave myself, I have been particularly careful to listen to the hundreds of representations that have come in to my office. Over the past few weeks, the variety of views that have been expressed to me have not either crystallised opinion behind one course of action or another or, indeed, delivered a cohesive picture, but they have indisputably confirmed that the constituency remains divided, as do the country and this House. It is sad that my correspondence has also reflected the unedifying spectacle of people who are trying, by hook or by crook, to reverse the decision of the electorate, or who are pursuing some perfect exit outcome, and in the course of so doing are dragging down people's opinion of this place and the people who work here.

Two themes have emerged. First, almost everyone I talk to wants MPs to stop setting procedural tricks and traps for their perceived opponents and just get on with leaving the EU, as was promised. Secondly, they recognise the Prime Minister's Herculean feat in bringing back a deal for us to vote on at all, but it has proved to be one that cannot be unequivocally backed by a large number of people in this House. For example, the backstop provides a great barrier for me in making my decision.

I voted to leave because it is quite obvious to me that the EU is going in the wrong direction for this country. It intends to subjugate this country and its other member states. It wants a European army and ever closer political union, it would like to drag all its members into a common currency, and its leaders are still unelected. I cannot continue to advocate membership of a grouping that will undermine NATO and would further diminish this Parliament and our democracy, which we all claim to be champions of.

I really want a country that is led by Queen and country, not by people from abroad. Quite frankly, I would like to have walked out the moment the referendum result had been declared. That is actually what most people think should have happened. However, I have to make a risk assessment of my decision, based on the options that are on offer. For me, to honour the referendum result is vital; anything less is a betrayal of the electorate. I cannot agree that moving the article 50 date is going to help us in any way whatsoever—it will only perpetuate divisions in this House—and a second referendum will divide this country even more.

I have talked to businesses that do not have a vote but provide the prosperity and jobs in this country that are so important. My local businesses, including The Entertainer and GE Healthcare, have all advocated support for this agreement. I cannot gamble with our country's future. If I do not support this withdrawal agreement, I feel that I will be gambling with the country's future in a reckless fashion. After last week's shenanigans, it is obvious that there are people in this House who would frustrate a no-deal position, and that that is now a huge risk to Brexit itself. That is not something I can countenance while still keeping faith with the electorate. I will therefore support the Prime Minister in the meaningful vote, as this deal appears to me to be the best option available to deliver the next stage of Brexit successfully.

This is not the end of Brexit; this is the beginning. There are negotiations to come, and this will provide a firm foundation for our future negotiations, in order to secure our economy and realise the opportunities that Brexit truly does offer this great country of ours.

10.8 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The UK Government seem to be repeating on a loop cycle after cycle of inane attempts to pacify their own party and satisfy some rabid newspaper owners, with no consideration given to the best interests of the people the Government are supposed to represent. There has been trip after trip to Brussels to tell the other member states what the UK wants out of its resignation from the EU; return after return, trying to explain why there has been no advance made, no advantage gained, no real progress at all; statement after statement made in this Chamber, blaming the other states for having the audacity to stand up for their collective and individual best interests and for the interests of their people.

Time after time, we have been treated to demonstrations of just how little understanding of the EU there is in the Government ranks. The last trips have been shining examples of just how impotent the UK has become, how out of touch with reality the Government have become and how much influence has been lost in the past couple of years. A Prime Minister went looking for

[Deidre Brock]

help with domestic problems to find that there were no longer helpful faces around the table. Her inability to articulate an argument in favour of clarification of terms already agreed on is the dirty mirror to the long and pointless succession of meetings held by her Ministers who also managed to walk out of the room with nothing.

It is just a few weeks before the UK leaves the EU and the new imperialists of Brexit are having to face up to the uncomfortable truth that the UK is now, at best, a middling power in the world. No longer does Britannia rule the waves; these days she is queuing up for a ticket for the ferry. Shorn of the muscle of the EU, there will be some serious reckonings to come, not least of which will be the WTO shocks. It is repeated so often that it has become a political meme: we can trade on WTO rules and all will be well in the world. There is a fond imagination that WTO rules are like the rules of a club. They are rules that everyone obeys, like gentlemen should, and no one would think of going outside the letter and the spirit of those rules.

The truth is that the WTO is a bear pit of contrasting interests and competing economies. The sacred rules are little more than guidelines for the battles in the WTO panels, dispute settlement body and appeals process. It is economic muscle that matters in these consultations and political muscle that counts in the dispute resolution. We are losing both by leaving the EU, so the WTO will become a far less welcoming place for us to take trade disputes. It will become a place where we will learn to take defeat, a place where the Brexiteers' dreams of adequacy will come crashing down.

Let me just illustrate that with an example: hormone-treated beef that the United States wanted to sell into the EU. The US complained in 1996 and the WTO ruling was in its favour, but horse-trading of quotas and tariffs between the EU and the US has meant that we have been able to keep our food chain free of that adulterated beef. The UK simply does not have the strength to resist that ruling. It has no way to offer the quota for high-quality beef without harming our own farmers and it does not have the economic resilience to soak up the tariffs.

The WTO is the dystopia of free trade, a baleful and distorted place where profit is king. Yet there we head, this ramshackle handcart gathering speed, driven by a Prime Minister who cannot control her own Government, far less her own party, egged on by a Labour party leader who has a similar lack of control over events on his side. A Tory Prime Minister deferring defeat for a month and a bit in the hope of finding some magic beans over Christmas was watched by a Labour Opposition leader frightened to bring her down in case he has to face up to some of those issues.

10.12 pm

Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con): In common with many others on both sides of this House, I sent out an email on the eve of the referendum to thousands of my constituents, not to tell them how I thought they should vote—they knew well enough how I thought they should vote—but to urge them to participate in this referendum where every vote would count. I said in that email:

“There are men and women of goodwill and common decency on both the Leave and Remain sides. Many I disagree with are my friends, and we disagree in goodwill and with good faith. When it is over the result must be respected. For it will be the collective judgment of the British people. As democrats that demands our respect.”

After the referendum, all parts of the House lined up to tell the public that they would respect the result, but as the urgency of that instruction of June 2016 has faded with the passage of time, people have now started to come out of the woodwork to indicate that they do not actually respect it. There is an undercurrent here of people saying that those who voted to leave were perhaps a bit thick or mildly racist and that it was impossible to comprehend that someone could be international and global in outlook, liberal, tolerant, decent and pro-immigration and be in favour of leaving the European Union.

Then we got the calls for the so-called second referendum. We have already had the second referendum. We had the first referendum in 1975 and the second one in 2016. If people want to articulate the case for a third referendum, I say bring it on, but let 41 years elapse between the second and the third, so stick the date in your diaries. We will have the third referendum in 2057. We cannot make a once-in-a-generation decision every three years. The agreement itself is fundamentally flawed.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): The agreement is flawed in many ways, not least because we would be subject to the binding rules of the ECJ, despite what we are told by those on the Front Bench.

Conor Burns: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We were clear during the campaign that the areas over which we wanted to take back control were our laws, our moneys and our borders. This withdrawal agreement fails in many ways, not least regarding the backstop, which is absolutely toxic for our friends from Northern Ireland.

Part of the problem is that we sort of approached these negotiations as if we were renegotiating the terms of our membership, not trying to agree the terms of our departure. We have been led by so many people in this process who fundamentally cleave to the messages they put out during the campaign—that it was a disaster and that there were no merits in leaving the European Union. I saw that up close and personal when I was a Parliamentary Private Secretary at the Treasury and latterly in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. This must be the first time in history that the terms of the peace have been written by the losing side.

This House has focused for too long now on the process of Brexit. I would like to say a word about the causes of Brexit, and I agree with so much of what the shadow Secretary of State said on this. Yes, the slogan was, “Take back control.” Yes, it was about leaving the European Union. Yes, it was about the opportunities beyond our shores to sign global trade deals, and the recognition that the EU's share of world GDP has fallen from 23% in 1980 and is likely to fall to 15% by 2020. It is not that the EU economy has shrunk in size, but that the rest of the world has grown faster and will continue to do so.

I think Brexit was a great cry from the heart and soul of the British people. Too many people in this country feel that the country and the economy are not working

for them, and that the affairs of our nation are organised around a London elite. They look at the bankers being paid bonuses for the banks that their taxes helped to rescue. They look at our embassies in the Gulf that are holding flat parties to sell off-plan exclusive London properties, when they worry about how they will ever get on to the housing ladder. They worry that they may be the first generation who are not better off than their parents, and they want to see a system back that spreads wealth and opportunity.

Brexit was a challenge—a rebuke to this place—but it represents an opportunity to take this country on a different path. I passionately believe that this nation is yearning for us to get back on to the domestic agenda. The people voted to take back control, and they want us to use that control to help them improve their lives and enrich this country.

10.17 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The referendum in 2016 was an event that I assumed would be followed by the new Prime Minister reaching out to the losing side across party boundaries to obtain its acceptance of and consent to the result. But that did not happen, and it became clear to me that the Prime Minister had no intention of pursuing that approach. It is deeply ironic that, just today, she tried to invoke the close 1997 devolution referendum in Wales in her Stoke speech, claiming that all parties accepted and backed the result at the time, when the Prime Minister is one of many on the Government Benches, including the Secretary of State for International Trade, who now say that a second referendum would be an abomination but who voted against implementing that referendum decision back in 1997.

The problem is that today's faux pas is so typical of the approach that the Prime Minister has taken. Right from the start, she failed to seek to embrace the 48% who were on the remain side and instead sought to pander to the most extreme Brexiteers in her party. In doing so, she characterised the negotiations with Brussels as a sort of poker game. I am afraid that that was always a false analogy. I voted against triggering article 50 because it was clear to me that this was not going to be like a card game at all. A better analogy would be a football match, where the other side is leading and all they need to do is to take the ball to the corner flag and hold it there until the final whistle blows.

We wasted the time available on internal Tory squabbling when the Prime Minister should have been seeking and securing consent. The definitive proof of that was a snap election, called for party political advantage in the middle of the process, that backfired spectacularly. The new Commons arithmetical reality meant that the Prime Minister would have to reach across the Chamber for an agreed way forward, but she did not—well, except to the DUP, but on purely transactional terms—and so she continued on. No effort of real substance was made, until desperation set in, to appeal to voters who supported remain. All those who questioned the wisdom of taking this road were to be labelled as traitors, saboteurs, remoaners or elitists, and today the Prime Minister talked of a subversion of democracy.

When there was a narrow victory in the Welsh referendum, a real effort was made to reach across to those who voted the other way to ask them their ideas,

to build safeguards for the new institutions, and to assuage concerns—to the extent that a decade later a second referendum was held in which people voted overwhelmingly to increase the Assembly's powers. The Prime Minister, in contrast, regarded a narrow referendum result as permission to interpret Brexit however she wanted. As a result, we have a leadership that has led us into a constitutional crisis.

Over the weekend, I read reports of a 64 metre-long fatberg in Sidmouth in the county of Devon. I apologise to hon. Members for this analogy, but what we are facing here is a sort of political fatberg that has to be dealt with. It will be unpleasant and smelly to do so, but it has to be cleared up. It is increasingly clear to me that clearing the blockage may require putting the options, including the option to remain, back to the people for a final say—if we are not to have a general election. Nothing has changed in the Prime Minister's approach in all this time. That is why we need a new Prime Minister and a Labour Government to clear up this mess.

10.21 pm

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): The problem with the withdrawal agreement is that it does not do what the Conservative party said we would do. In our manifesto, we said we would leave the customs union, but annex II, under the backstop provisions, would keep us in the customs union. We have had endless guarantees that the United Kingdom would not be divided, but the whole appendix divides Northern Ireland from the rest of Great Britain—something that Unionists are opposed to in principle, not just as the details of a treaty but because it seeks to divide our country.

The Conservatives and those who campaigned for Brexit always said that we must be free from the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. Why? Because it is a political court as well as a legal court, and because, Mr Speaker—I know you think this is very important—it could overrule this House and overrule our democracy. It could make laws for us that could not be stopped by Parliament—unless of course we withdrew altogether, which is what we are doing, with the purpose of taking away its authority to rule over us. For all this—for potentially being locked in a customs union, for dividing our nation up, and for allowing the European Court of Justice to continue—we are going to pay our European friends £39 billion of taxpayers' money. For that we get nothing in return—no guarantee of any trade deal in future, but a vacuous political statement that could mean anything to anybody.

In the detail of this treaty and its failures, and its inability to deliver the Brexit that people voted for, perhaps we forget the economic benefits that come from making decisions for ourselves. We know from our own lives that the decisions we make for ourselves are likely to be better than those made for us by other people, but that is true as a nation as well, because any decision made in this House is accountable to the British people. The aim for us as politicians in all parties is to see the standard of living of the British people improve generation after generation, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns) said. That is something we seek to do. In the Conservative party, it was one of the founding principles that Disraeli followed—the “condition of the people” question.

[Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg]

The advantage of leaving the European Union is that we can once again make these decisions for ourselves. We can have a trade system that opens us up to the world, rather than being the fortress that the European Union has created to try to maintain its standard against the winds that blow from the rest of the world and have made the rest of the world grow so much faster than Europe has managed in recent times—a Europe that is mired in recession and economic failure.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I can reassure my hon. Friend that if he takes just a minute longer, he might persuade me to join him in the Lobby.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am delighted to hear that. I think there will be a cascade of Members going into the Lobby to vote against this bad deal, because it denies us the opportunities that will make Brexit a success. It takes us further away from the ability to open up our economy to the benefits of free trade and the benefits that would allow the prices of food, clothing and footwear to be reduced, increasing the standard of living, most particularly of the least well-off in society. Instead, we are tied into a protectionist racket that keeps prices high and makes our economy less efficient. The rest of the world is overtaking us and the whole of Europe because it becomes less competitive as it seeks an outmoded, anti-competitive system, thinking that it can simply protect itself.

In this withdrawal agreement, there is no end in sight to the backstop—it could go on for generations. How long did the backstop turn out to be for Norway when it voted not to join, before it got a fully-fledged deal of its own? Over 20 years. “Temporary” in European terms is, for most of us, a generation. Of course, “temporary” in parliamentary terms is even longer, as we remember with the Parliament Act 1911 and the Liberal promise never delivered on to abolish the income tax—typical of the Liberals, you might say, Mr Speaker.

We risk denying ourselves these extraordinary opportunities and, in doing so, taking ourselves away from the electorate, for whom we promised to deliver on Brexit. Ultimately, whatever we think, surely we owe it to our voters to deliver. Otherwise, why should they ever trust us again?

10.26 pm

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): How on earth do I sum up in the little time I have my feelings and grave concerns about the biggest issue to dominate our political landscape since the second world war? How on earth do I represent the outpouring of emotion and the sense of division, anger, confusion and disenfranchisement experienced by the citizens of our country and my constituency?

People are angry with us. They are angry for so many different reasons—angry because they were led to a cliff edge wearing a blindfold by a privileged and reckless few and told to jump, without knowing how soft or hard the landing would be or whether they would survive the fall; angry because of the distortion, propaganda and wilful manipulation of facts for political gain; and angry because Parliament is currently unable to function and politicians debating the issue repeat the same hollow soundbites ad infinitum, like a broken record.

Some of the few who led us here are long gone or, indeed, have never graced these green Benches themselves. They are safely and comfortably sitting back, enjoying vast private wealth reserves and watching from a distance as others are left having to untangle their legacy. Let us remember that millions of ordinary people out there have done exactly what successive Governments have always encouraged them to do—worked hard, paid their taxes and kept going when times were tough. There are families who have built and lost businesses, seen jobs come and go and watched as their communities felt the tightening grip of recession and then the nasty, strangling hands of relentless austerity. People like them feel betrayed by us, the politicians.

I am here to speak honestly for and on behalf of the people of my constituency of Canterbury, who have written to me in their thousands. I would struggle to find a single comparable constituency in terms of the direct impact that could be caused by Brexit. In Canterbury we have the University of Kent, also known as “the European university”. The University of Kent and Canterbury Christ Church University are the biggest employers in our area. They rely on their close links with Europe. Strong academia relies on exchange programmes, European partner campuses and freedom of movement for those who teach the next generation of British workers.

Tourism and hospitality is the biggest employer of under-30s in my area. Canterbury is often the first place that EU visitors stop when they come into the UK via our Kent terminals. Our beautiful cathedral receives about 1 million visitors every year, and our whole constituency welcomes over 7 million visitors. Those visitors stay in our hotels and B&Bs, use our restaurants, visit our independent retail businesses and study in our language schools. They drink in our pubs, enjoy our apples, and eat our local oysters and chips on Whitstable beach. They wonder at the English vineyards they drive past in villages such as Barham and Chartham, which are now producing and exporting some of the best wines in the world. Major employers such as Kent brewery Shepherd Neame, based in Faversham, and the Whitstable Oyster Company tell me that seamless import and export is vital to any post-Brexit future in our area.

Our hospitals have research departments benefiting from close, borderless co-operation with their EU partners, and local businesses in the Canterbury and Whitstable area rely heavily on the relatively easy, free flow of traffic to and from the port of Dover. Economic success is wholly dependent on there not being huge problems caused by Operation Stack or Operation Brock, with tailbacks for miles and miles down the M26, M2 and M20. One example is Barton Marine, an award-winning manufacturer of bespoke, specialist equipment used in sailing and also the theatre industry. It employs about 30 local, highly skilled people in its Whitstable factory, and the chief executive officer tells me she is uncertain of their future.

10.31 pm

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): I believe that, ultimately, the final Brexit settlement has to be a compromise between leave and remain, while fundamentally delivering on the decision of June 2016. Remainers have to accept that the country clearly voted to exit the European Union, having been assured the Government would

implement the decision of the referendum and, accordingly, that we have to leave. Leavers, like me, have to accept that the vote to leave was not overwhelming, as nearly half of our fellow citizens voted to remain, and the Brexit that is enacted therefore has to reflect their preference for a close partnership with Europe. This attitude of give and take is the foundation and lifeblood of any successful democracy.

Looking at the Government's deal, there are some merits: providing for an orderly exit with a transitional period, securing the rights of nationals on both sides and pointing the way to a UK-EU free trade agreement. However, like many Members, I have significant concerns about the backstop. I appreciate that this is only meant as an insurance policy, but I fear that it will be in the EU's interests to push the UK into the backstop, in which we could then be held against our will, with Northern Ireland split off from Great Britain, as there is no mechanism for us to leave without the EU's consent.

Most importantly, agreeing to the backstop risks placing our country at a significant disadvantage in negotiations on a comprehensive trade agreement with the EU. I very much want a trade agreement with the EU, but we would risk going into those talks with one hand tied behind our back and compelled to agree to almost anything it proposed either to avoid going into the backstop or to escape from it. There is a real risk of an open-ended negotiation while we remain trapped in the backstop or in an extended transition period. The deck will have been stacked in the EU's favour, making a satisfactory final relationship very difficult. Almost unbearable pressure could be placed on the UK side. A simple example of that has to be the French President's comments on maintaining current access to UK fishing waters.

Ultimately, I believe that agreeing to the deal represents a leap of faith, and that is why, currently, I could not vote for it. However, having said that, I do not believe that no deal or no Brexit are acceptable alternatives. In delivering a second referendum, we would just continue, and even deepen, the division and uncertainty with what would be an abdication of our responsibility as elected representatives to deliver a workable solution. I also have grave concerns about no deal. I believe it would lead to an economic correction. No one knows to what extent or how severe that correction might be, but there is a lot of crystal ball gazing—a gamble that could cost growth and jobs. I think it is reasonable to ask whether that gamble is worth taking.

I hoped that the Prime Minister would be able to present an agreement to the House after the pause with a formal guarantee and a mechanism that would give us power to leave the backstop. There are amendments that might be able to achieve that, and if that is the case, I will be prepared to change my position, but ultimately, as it stands at the moment, the agreement is unacceptable with the backstop.

10.35 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Despite significant inward investment in our area, my constituency voted to leave in 2016, and I respect that result. We know that membership of the European Union has been and continues to be a deeply divisive issue, dividing communities, political parties—some more

than others—and even families. We also know that the EU referendum was an attempt by some to try to settle a division within the Tory party—something that has obviously backfired spectacularly.

Brexit has become the main focus of our Parliament and our country. In many ways, that is as it should be, because it is the most important issue of our time. It is something that will impact on this generation and the generation to follow—another reason why 16 and 17-year-olds should have been given the chance to vote in 2016. However, I am sure that I am not alone in finding it incredibly frustrating that we cannot focus as much attention as we should on the many other important issues of the day.

I, along with many other hon. Members, voted to trigger article 50 to allow the Prime Minister to start negotiations on a deal to honour the result of the referendum. The deal that the Prime Minister has negotiated does not do that. As we are aware, the current deal has succeeded in uniting leavers and remainers in opposition to it. Indeed, only 6% of constituents who have contacted me since 1 December support the Prime Minister's deal. The deal that the Prime Minister has negotiated does not protect jobs, workplace rights or environmental standards. It will not ensure frictionless trade for UK businesses and provides no certainty about our future relationship. It provides no guarantee that the UK will continue equivalent arrangements with key EU programmes and agencies, and the Government's own economic analysis shows that the deal will make the country poorer, with GDP falling by around 3.9% and every region of the UK being worse off.

I know that if that is the case, poorer areas of our country and communities such as mine will fare worse still. I cannot vote to support a deal that will do that to the people I represent. These are not just people I represent; they are my family, my friends, people I have grown up with and local businesses that serve the communities I have grown up in. I cannot vote to inflict greater pain and hardship.

I first got involved in politics as a 14-year-old during the miners' strike in 1984. The reason I did was that I witnessed an uncaring Government rip the heart out of my community and many others around me, and I could not stand back and do nothing. The Tory Government then destroyed whole industries and left many workers on the scrap heap because they had no plan B. History does repeat itself if we do not learn the lessons of the past. It is clear that the Tories have learnt absolutely nothing from the damage that they did in the 1980s and '90s or the damage that their austerity has done over the past eight years.

I fully acknowledge that people in my constituency voted to leave, and many still believe that leave is the best option. There are many others I have also spoken to, including individuals, small business owners and community groups, who have deep concern about the unfolding Brexit situation. EU citizens who have made my constituency their home face uncertainty, and students face uncertainty over programmes such as Erasmus+. If we get this wrong, our country will live with the consequences for decades to come.

I will vote against the Prime Minister's deal. I will also continue to vote against any attempt to take Britain out of the European Union without a deal, as I believe that this would prove a disaster for our country and for

[Gerald Jones]

the people of my constituency. When the Prime Minister's deal is defeated, I hope that she will listen to Parliament, come back and try to remedy what she has done. If she cannot or will not do that, she should step aside and make way for a general election.

10.39 pm

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I would be the first to concede that the Prime Minister did not inherit the best hand in the negotiations, with her predecessor making no preparations whatever for a leave vote in the referendum. The referendum in North West Leicestershire was not close: it was 61% to 39% to leave the European Union. In the east midlands, it was 59% to 41%.

Leave the European Union we must, but this withdrawal agreement is not the way to do it. It will not deliver the Brexit that 17.4 million people voted for. At least when we are in the European Union we can leave, whereas I think that if we get this withdrawal agreement we will never be able to leave. We will be handing over our major bargaining chip, £39 billion of taxpayers' money, for what? For the bulk of the divorce payment during the transition period, with vague promises of a future relationship which is in no way legally binding.

Many of my colleagues rightly pointed out their concerns about the backstop to prevent a hard border on the island of Ireland: a hard border that was already dismissed before it became a political issue by HMRC Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland customs and excise, when they stated that the existing infrastructure was quite sufficient to deal with the border on the island of Ireland; a border that all parties concerned—the EU, the Republic of Ireland and the UK—said they would never implement; and a border that the WTO stated is unnecessary for security concerns.

We are told that neither the UK nor the EU wishes to use the backstop, and that the EU would be uncomfortable with the backstop. Reading through the agreement, however, it looks like the deal of the century for the EU if we sign up to it. Not only will they get to keep the £100 billion in trade deficit we have with them, but they will have an agreement that prevents us from partaking in free trade deals that allow our people to access cheaper goods and services. That effectively makes the Department for International Trade redundant. No country with an existing EU free trade agreement would need to deal with the UK, and any country that does not have an existing free trade agreement would be subject to tariff rates set by the EU.

All the agreement will do is prolong the uncertainty. We could go into years of negotiations over a free trade deal. I campaigned to leave, and leave we must on the basis of sovereignty. This agreement would see our country not getting back control, but losing control and losing sovereignty. Even the Prime Minister's own Brexit adviser Olly Robbins is reported to have warned her that there is was no guarantee that Britain will be able to exit the backstop, which risks leaving us trapped in the EU's customs union indefinitely.

I am of the very strong opinion that the final relationship that the European Union has in mind for the UK, if we ever get to that point, will be very similar to the backstop. Let us remember that under this withdrawal agreement

we would be subject, if we got to a final agreement, to the veto of the remaining EU27 on the final deal. We already know that the French will want our fish, Spain will want at least joint sovereignty of Gibraltar and everybody else will want a piece out of it.

This is a bad deal. It will not get back control of our money, our borders or our laws. It will not regain our sovereignty, but lose our sovereignty. I am not walking away from the Prime Minister; she walked away from her Mansion House speech. I cannot support this withdrawal agreement. I will be voting against it. Quite honestly, my chairman rang me last night and said, "Don't bother coming back to North West Leicestershire if you vote for it—you'll be deselected."

10.43 pm

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I also rise to speak against the deal, but it is clear that the House now needs an opportunity to show what it is for, as well as what it is against. I hope that in the coming days we will have the opportunity to do that.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) so eloquently and brilliantly put it, the Prime Minister's last-ditch attempts to reach out across party lines were too little, too late. Unfortunately, the Prime Minister has shown yet again a tin ear to Parliament. It is a real shame, because we did not need to be here now. She could have taken up the offers from the Leader of the Opposition to have cross-party talks. She could have taken the temperature of Parliament long before we got here. Maybe if she had done so we would not be here now.

We now face deadlock in the Commons while the country is crying out for us to deal with Brexit. I fear that entrenched positions are getting wider, divisions are getting deeper, and our political discourse is getting more and more toxic. Absolutism is ruling, when reaching out and building a compromise and consensus is what is needed. My sense, which I think is reflected in this debate, is that we are now reaching a point where there is a growing appetite for a consensus to be reached. However, there is clearly no majority in Parliament for the Prime Minister's deal and there is no majority in Parliament for no deal. While I fully respect those who advocate for remain, there is equally no majority in Parliament for a second referendum. I fear that the strategy of all those concerned is to run out of road so that one of the options becomes the last one standing.

That is why I have come to the view that we need a plan B for when the deal is defeated tomorrow. I came together with my friend, the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), to co-author a report seeking a common market 2.0 option with the backing of the cross-party Norway Plus Group. I completely understand that many people want us to remain in the EU—we are better off economically and politically in the EU, and I used to be the director of Britain in Europe, for goodness' sake—but I understand the sentiment that led to the Brexit vote in the first place, and I respect it. Part of the reason behind the vote was a deep scepticism about politics and politicians, so we cannot ignore or seek to overturn the result. We really cannot say, "Sorry, we cannot reach an agreement. Back to you guys." What is more, referendums do not give rise to rational decisions on complex matters, either.

“Common Market 2.0” makes the case for a Brexit that delivers on the result of the 2016 referendum while protecting the economic interests of working people by becoming part of a new common market with the existing EU. It would create a long-term partnership that keeps us closely aligned and offers us real frictionless trade through full single market access and a new customs union. It would guarantee workers’ rights and provide new controls over free movement in certain circumstances. It would allow more money for public services, as our contributions would be significantly lower, and would give us a voice over the regulations that govern the single market. I know it is not a lot of people’s first choice or ideal, but it is an option for a plan B that we all need to consider.

Ministers and the Prime Minister have said many times that they want to know what Parliament is for, not just what it is against. I hope that over the coming days, we will be given the opportunity to say what we are for, and to come together and decide that sometimes we cannot get our ideal, but we need to have a plan B.

10.46 pm

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), although we disagree about how to deliver on Brexit, because while we may have differences of opinion, we are all among equals in this place.

Some 65% of my constituents voted to leave the European Union in 2016. From holding street surgeries and public meetings across the constituency, I can say that that figure has not changed. When this matter was last discussed in this place, I was disappointed not to have been called and that the vote was pulled. The question is this: what has substantially changed between then, when the question was going to be put, and tomorrow, when the matter will be put before the House? The answer is nothing.

I refer Members to the words of the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds). He said:

“Despite a letter of supposed reassurance from the European Union, there are no ‘legally binding assurances’, as the Prime Minister talked about in December...In fact, there is nothing new. Nothing has changed.”

That comes from DUP colleagues who help to keep us in government. We talk about 3 million extra jobs, 3 million apprenticeships and 1.9 million more children going to good and outstanding schools in our great country. That is happening under a Conservative Government who exist because we are supported by the DUP. We have to take its views and concerns into account.

I face a difficult decision in that I have never voted against the Conservative party in my nine years in Parliament. I had to resign as a vice-chairman of the Conservative party, as well as a Government trade envoy to Pakistan, where I was born before coming to this great country at the age of six, not speaking a word of English. It was this great party that stood for aspiration and said, “You can work hard and be whatever you want to be. You can be a Member of Parliament at the age of 31 and represent your home town.” When I had to step down as a trade envoy, trade had increased by 10%, and I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands), a former International Trade Minister, for his brilliant

support in achieving that. Our manifesto commitment—it was on page 36—made it clear that leaving the EU meant leaving the single market, the customs union and the jurisdiction of the ECJ. What we have here does not achieve that at all.

The opportunities that our great country will have to secure those brilliant trade deals with partners around the world will be limited. I was in the United States over Christmas for the 116th congressional opening session, and our parliamentary counterparts were very clear. They want to negotiate a trade deal, but they understand that if we have European regulation intertwined with this trade deal, it will limit our opportunities to do that great trade deal with them. Apart from being our key trading partner, the US is our No. 1 country for security, whatever our relationship in relation to Brexit. For me, security is the No. 1 priority for our great country, and the US is a key partner in delivering that.

I do not think it is right at all to have another referendum. No Member of Parliament who won their seat by one vote would ever say they should not take up their seat, so we should honour and deliver the public mandate. In my constituency, it was about sovereignty: British people electing British Members of Parliament to have the final say on our laws and how our country is governed.

10.50 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am eternally grateful, Mr Speaker, that you have called me slightly earlier than I thought you might. I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti).

There can be few times in the history of Parliament when MPs have faced two such difficult issues as Iraq and Brexit. There are parallels. Those of us who voted against the invasion of Iraq were continually leaned on by the Executive and told that if we knew what they knew, we would vote for the invasion. That turned out to be one the biggest foreign policy disasters that this country has known, and I fear that Brexit will become one of the biggest domestic policy disasters this country has known.

The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) quoted Disraeli, but I think that if Disraeli came back to the House now, he would be struck not by differences but by similarities. There are huge divisions in the country. Two of the great novels of the 19th century, “Sybil” and “Coningsby”, explained those huge divisions and what they meant to this country and the poor of this country.

I disagree with the hon. Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns), but I share his analysis. Why did people vote for Brexit? They did so because of austerity. They felt that they had been left behind and ignored. And it did not have to be that way. Other countries in the EU chose a different route. The Portuguese, in particular, under the Government of António Costa, chose to take on the troika, which went in and told them they were bankrupt, and would have to cut and cut and cut more, and they chose not to. They took on the troika, and Portugal has recovered more quickly than any other southern European country.

That is why Brexit is such a poisonous debate. I believe that the Prime Minister’s deal is the wrong deal. As I said earlier, we are being given a false prospectus.

[Dr David Drew]

The idea that it is “my deal or no deal” is completely wrong. We should reject this deal and recognise that this is a race to the bottom. The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) was right about this magical idea that WTO rules will be great for our economy. We know what they involve. We need to look at the economic underpinning and what it would require us to do. It is not our salvation.

That is why we must rule out no deal, but also vote against the Prime Minister’s deal and come back with something substantive, and then test it electorally. Personally, I want that to be via a general election, but if we are driven towards a referendum, much as I hate referendums, it is something we will have to face up to in order to bring this country back together again, because the divisions have been made so great. We need to recognise that our policies are wrong and do something about it.

10.54 pm

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): I am not an ideologue on Brexit; I campaigned hard to remain in 2016, and do not regret having led the “Stronger In” campaign in my constituency. My strong family and other links to the continent mean that I have never been what is called a “Brexititeer”. But like my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) and unlike my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), I strongly believe that the referendum in 2016 was a legitimate exercise, with huge voter participation. It did not get the result that I wanted, but the result needs to be respected. I have spent the last two and a half years believing that, with the right deal, Brexit could work. Indeed, the ability to leave the EU is in the treaties themselves.

My view, however, is that as it currently stands, this agreement is one of the worst possible combinations. I am stating today for the first time that, as the deal currently stands, I will vote against it tomorrow night. Brexit is a set of challenges and opportunities, but this deal fails to address the challenges. It kicks the can down the road on EU trade until at least December 2020. It closes down the opportunities: most prominently, there is not going to be an independent trade policy of any consequence.

Some say that there are merits. The Prime Minister lauds and promotes some of them. For example, the deal ends free movement but for me and my inner London constituents, free movement has never been a particular issue. Some 11,000 nationals of EU countries in Chelsea and Fulham are all very welcome to stay—one is even my wife. The Prime Minister’s achievement in ending free movement is not much of one at all for me and my constituency.

The three principal reasons why I oppose the agreement are, first, that it treats Northern Ireland very differently from the rest of the UK; secondly, there is the backstop itself. Both those reasons have featured quite heavily. My third reason is this: I believe that embedded within the agreement is being in a customs union with the European Union for the long term, not just in the backstop. That is the stated goal in the future partnership. It is a myth that the withdrawal agreement plus the future partnership opens up all possible future trade outcomes. No: the economic partnership will

“build and improve on the single customs territory provided for in the Withdrawal Agreement which obviates the need for checks on rules of origin.”

It “builds and improves on”—that is unacceptable. There is not going to be any independent trade policy in a customs union or in any single customs territory. Indeed, Sabine Weyand, Michel Barnier’s No. 2, briefed EU ambassadors that the future partnership

“requires the customs union as the basis of the future relationship”.

That gives rise to all kinds of problems: trade agreements, the Turkey trap, and the contracting out of trade remedies to Brussels, with the effect that will have on key UK industries such as steel and ceramics. The UK will lose its say and contract out that policy to Brussels. Then there are trade preferences. How we treat the developing world is incredibly important. Those will now be a matter for Brussels. That will be a huge loss for UK influence in foreign policy.

I talked earlier today about some of the comments made by some senior EU officials. I will not repeat those now, but it is always worth while for us to study what somebody we are negotiating with is saying. Most, maybe all, of the alternatives are preferable to the agreement as it currently stands. Brussels needs a deal too, and Barnier’s mandate is to achieve a deal. Unless the deal can pass the House of Commons, it is not a deal at all.

10.58 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Rotherham voted overwhelmingly to leave the EU, and I take very seriously my job to represent my constituency. I want to support this deal, but I cannot currently as it has fundamental flaws—not least, that it omits protections of workers’ rights. The political declaration is vague and non-binding. It is not a framework for a future trade deal.

To vote for the deal, I would need some assurances that are in the Government’s gift and do not require extending negotiations with the EU. My principal concerns are about women’s rights, equality and human rights. What will the Government do to ensure that those are protected?

Let me give some examples of the EU rights that we need to see. Under the working time directive, 2 million workers gained entitlements to paid annual leave and many were women working part-time. There are the pregnancy and maternity rights at work and the work-life balance directive. I turn specifically to violence against women and girls: how will the UK replicate the VAWG protections and sustained funding currently provided by the EU? European protection orders grant victims of violence equivalent protection orders against a perpetrator across the EU. Those will no longer automatically be available to the UK after Brexit unless the Government commit to opt in to the protection after 2020.

When will the Government actually ratify the Istanbul convention? Fundamentally, what measures will they take to ensure that we are keeping pace with the EU in maintaining gender equality? There is a precedent. We are currently members of the United Nations convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, under which each member state reports on the progress that it has made in respect of implementation targets. Will the Government agree to monitor and report on our standing on equality and human rights in

relation to EU legislation? The House could then debate the report, and a commitment could be made to update our legislation if that was the will of the House.

Let me now say something about human rights, and specifically about the charter of fundamental rights of the European Union. On the Government's current terms, as the UK leaves the EU the charter will no longer have effect in UK law, and the rights for which it provides are therefore at risk. I know the Government do not think that removing it will affect substantive rights, but the Equality and Human Rights Commission disagrees. Last year its chair said:

“The Government has promised there will be no rowing back on people's rights after Brexit. If we lose the charter protections, that promise will be broken. It will cause legal confusion and there will be gaps in the law.”

The reason the charter is so important is that it gives rights to us all. It gives us the right to dignity, and the right to the protection of personal data and health. It gives protections to workers, women, children, older people, LGBT people, and disabled people. I understand why the Government do not want to adopt the charter—it has the potential to override Acts of Parliament—but we should not be afraid of that. As we have seen in the case of universal credit, it is possible for the Government to get things wrong, and the safeguard provided by the charter is an excellent safety net from which we should all seek comfort.

There are a number of charter rights for which UK law does not provide equivalent protection. They include articles 20 and 21, on “Equality before the law” and “Non-discrimination”, and article 24, on the right of children for their “best interests” to be “a primary consideration” in all actions taken by a public or private institution. The charter also contains an explicit prohibition of discrimination based on someone's sexuality. I urge the Minister to take that point seriously.

11.2 pm

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): It seems many years ago that I was one of the 81 Conservative rebels who voted for an in/out referendum in 2011, when the then coalition Government were opposed to it. I did some work in the last Parliament to ensure that the 2015 Conservative party manifesto contained a commitment to an in/out referendum, and we did indeed have such a referendum in June 2016. I happened to be marginally on the Remain side in that referendum, but as a result of the outcome, I have consistently said that I will vote to ensure that we deliver Brexit for the people whom I represent in the Black country and the west midlands and for the country more widely, and I have continued to vote in the House to achieve the objective of Britain's leaving the European Union.

In tonight's debate and tomorrow, the House faces a real choice: a choice about the direction in which we want to take our country. Before I came to the House, I was an entrepreneur. I worked in business for nearly 20 years. I have always been a pragmatist, looking at how we can get things to work. On the balance of what I see before me on the political landscape and in the House, I will reluctantly support the Prime Minister's deal tomorrow, because I think it incumbent on us now to put the divisions and the debate about Brexit behind us.

What the Prime Minister's and the Government's deal delivers is the centre ground. On one hand—and I have great respect for my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg)—we have what some would call the ideological fantasy of a pure Brexit; on the other, we have an Opposition who are obsessed with tactical manoeuvring to try to force a general election. If we do not make the right decision now, we will potentially face a constitutional crisis and years of debate in this country about the direction of Brexit. That would do profound damage to our economy because of a long period of uncertainty, and profound damage to the fabric of our democracy as those who voted in the referendum will potentially see their wishes not implemented by this Parliament, which would be a profound wound to our democratic process. I also fear that Britain's reputation in the world—Britain's reputation as a permanent member of the Security Council and as one of the world's most effective military powers—will be undermined at the very time that we should be grasping the opportunities of the future. Britain can lead the way as we leave the EU and shape our future relationship with the EU, and grasp those opportunities and exert our enduring power in the world, which has always been the British way.

We must do the right thing. We must be pragmatic. I will support the deal in the Lobby tomorrow night and I urge my colleagues to do the same.

11.6 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): As we reflect on this debate and those of the last few days, weeks and months—and indeed for the day or two to come—the question the public will ask and for us to ask is this: how have we got ourselves into this mess? We are weeks away from leaving the EU if the current timetable stays as it is, and we have a Government determined to carry out a vote tomorrow which by all accounts they will lose substantially, yet we carry on in a parallel universe as if that is not happening, which does no service to our country or this Parliament.

The Chancellor is to respond to today's debate, and it is incumbent on somebody to start talking about what is going to happen. Across this House we have been speaking to each other, but who has changed their mind? We are in a constitutional crisis; our country is facing a national emergency. As the Chancellor himself knows, a no deal would be a complete catastrophe, yet we cannot among ourselves decide where we should go, as my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) and others have said.

Who is going to get what they want? My honest view is that nobody is going to get exactly what they want. Everyone in here has fundamental principles that they feel strongly about. We have heard some brilliant speeches, including from people I fundamentally disagree with, but at the end of the day the question is: how are we going to resolve this in a way that benefits our country? We have as a Parliament only at this very late stage woken up to that question.

If I wanted, I could say that this person or that person was responsible, but for goodness' sake, does the Chancellor not think that a Government facing such a national emergency should have reached out to Opposition Front Benchers? [*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) is chuntering, and that is

[Vernon Coaker]

exactly what I am talking about. [Interruption.] There we go; let's shout at each other. What I am saying is that we need to reach a point where we seek consensus and seek to work in the national interest.

That is why there is a majority in this House for Parliament taking control and trying to deliver that. That is why Members of Parliament from all parties across the House have said that we are going to have to come together to resolve this matter. We cannot carry on talking to each other through loudhailers. We cannot carry on just saying, "I am right and you are wrong." The people of this country are fed up with it. They want this Parliament to act. They want us to reach consensus on an agreed way forward that is of benefit to this country, and they expect us to act in a mature way to deliver that.

11.9 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): A majority of the voters in my constituency voted leave in the referendum, and they have told me in large numbers that they feel insulted by the comment that they did not know what they were voting for. Many of my constituents have urged me not to support this withdrawal agreement. Indeed, some of them have told me they voted to remain but would vote to leave in another referendum. Opposition Members might like to know that some of them are lifelong Labour supporters. One emailed me to say:

"I implore you to vote against the current deal being presented to Parliament on Tuesday. Voting for it would be a betrayal of all the promises made".

The vote was not a mandate for a second referendum. It was not a mandate for delaying article 50. It was not a mandate for cancelling Brexit. However we vote tomorrow, we must leave the European Union as promised on Friday 29 March. The only question is whether we do so with an agreement or on World Trade Organisation rules. Some have implied that the closeness of the referendum result justified another vote or a compromise on leaving. This morning, the Prime Minister gave the example of the Welsh devolution referendum in 1997, when people voted by a tiny margin of 0.3% to create the Welsh Assembly, arguing that this was accepted by both sides. We can learn from that.

I want to know why Northern Ireland should be the price we have to pay for Brexit, as Martin Selmayr has said. Why have experts warned that the UK-US alliance and the Five Eyes alliance are at risk if we sign up to this withdrawal agreement? Why should we cough up the £39 billion of punishment money without any indication of a trade deal? In my view, that is unacceptable.

The fishermen of south-east Cornwall, whom I have represented in various ways for around three decades, are already struggling from the EU landing obligation without adequate bycatch to compensate them for having to bring untargeted, over-quota fish ashore. Just yesterday, I received a text message from a local fisherman with a photo of a deck full of bass. He said that this was "another failure of the CFP...How many tens of thousands of tons"—

have been—

"thrown back since November only for it to rot on the sea bed. An absolute joke!"

Brexit promises great opportunities for an outward-looking global multicultural nation—the home of engineers, scientists and artists. Our future success will be to the benefit of all our European friends, but we cannot seize those opportunities if we are trapped in backstop limbo, like in "Groundhog Day". The referendum was a wake-up call to the establishment, but the establishment keeps pressing the snooze button. It is time to wake up. I cannot support this deal.

11.13 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for this opportunity to speak in today's debate, because the prosperity of our country, our regions and our nations is at stake. I will be voting against the Prime Minister's deal tomorrow for two main reasons. First, on the Government's own analysis, it will make every region and nation of this country poorer, and that is not what people voted for. It is set to give less opportunity to our young people than we grew up with. The economic assessment of the Prime Minister's draft agreement with Brussels estimated that the British economy would shrink by 3.9%, which is equivalent to the loss of £100 billion by 2030. Trade barriers could equal 10% of the value of trade in services, meaning that the economy's biggest sector would suffer to the tune of more than £44 billion a year.

Secondly, it is a blind Brexit. We have no idea what the future will look like. No one leaves their home on the promise of a great new home with no guarantees about where it is, what it looks like, how many rooms it has or what condition it is in. However, that is what the Prime Minister is asking us to do, like an estate agent who then scarpers, leaving us standing with our suitcases. The political declaration gives no certainty or clarity about the direction of our future relationship with the European Union, and it is a gamble that I will not take.

Hundreds of residents—young and old alike—and businesses in my constituency have contacted me over the past few weeks and months. Businesses report stockpiling and concern for the future—perhaps not the immediate future, but the medium and longer term—and they should be planning production, not employee leave during April, May and June while they work out what the future looks like. Some 60% of those who have contacted me back a people's vote, and a further 20% back remain in some form. Only 10% say that we should vote for the deal or leave with no deal.

All too often I find myself scratching my head in disbelief at where we are and at the Government's kamikaze attitude towards no deal. For generations, we have had an assumption of progress—a promise as a nation about what the next generation should have and that they should do better than the last—but we find ourselves now breaking that promise. The Government are set to take our nation's prosperity backwards while turning to the country and saying, "This is what you voted for." Contrary to the "sunlit uplands" of the most eloquent speech of the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), under the deregulated, free-market future that many hard Brexiteers will look to, we know that the rich will get richer and the poor will see less and less of the wealth of their nation.

We cannot take progress for granted. It is something that we in politics have a duty to fight for and to protect. However, time is running out and we have

choices to make. It would be my preference to remain and reform, and I would support a second referendum between remain and a deal as agreed by this House. If we are to leave, we should do so in a way that delivers on the referendum, but with the least damaging economic impact, such as a single-market and customs-union solution—a common market 2.0—as a base from which to build our future relationship.

11.17 pm

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): The remain campaign had everything going for it. It had the endorsement of all the political parties. It had money from big business. It had £9 million of taxpayers' money for a propaganda sheet. It had celebrity endorsements from luvvies, actors, singers and one overpaid football commentator. It had the churches and the charities. It even managed to enlist the Treasury to carry out "Project Fear" and still it could not win.

The people of this country voted to leave, but the remainers were not satisfied, because they then decided to deride and sneer at leave voters, describing us as racist, xenophobic, bigoted little-Englanders, too stupid to understand what we were doing. The remainers did every they could to undermine the result. They tried to overthrow it in the High Court. They tried to thwart it in the unelected House of Lords using a hereditary peer. They have used big business, with Starbucks, I believe, announcing yesterday that it would support a second referendum. Now, in this very Chamber, they are using Members of Parliament who were happy to stand on manifestos committing themselves to the delivery of the referendum result.

It is true that the deal before us is not the one that the millions of us who voted to leave would have hoped for, but some of the blame for that lies with the Members of Parliament who loudly announced from day one of the negotiating process that Britain could not possibly leave the European Union without a deal. What sort of a negotiation is it when people say that we cannot walk out of the room? They suggested that Britain, with the fifth largest economy in the world, was unable to govern without the guiding hand of Juncker and others in the bloated bureaucracy in Brussels. Having made it harder to get a decent deal, they are now making it impossible for the Prime Minister by voting the whole thing down. Frankly, I cannot believe that some of them sat as Ministers in a Conservative Government—some of them rather second-rate Ministers in my opinion—and used the Whips Office to demand the loyalty of Back Benchers when they were imposing rather questionable policies.

Having made it much harder for the Government and the Prime Minister, they now seek to vote the whole thing down, not because they want a second referendum, a Norway deal or something else, but because they do not want any kind of Brexit at all. They will, of course, be joined in voting down the motion by principled, decent Members of Parliament, like my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax), who believe in Brexit and believe that this deal will not deliver it. All I would ask my hon. Friends, whom I respect and admire, is do they really want to be sharing a Division Lobby tomorrow with Conservative MPs who have done so much to thwart the will of the British public?

Nobody knows what is going to happen if and when this compromise deal is voted down. What will happen then? Some people say that we will get a hard Brexit, which I would fully support, but others will be doing their very best to stop any form of Brexit. All I would say is that I am not a gambler, so I will take the compromise in front of me. It is time to settle this matter once and for all, but Britain did vote for leave, and Brexit must happen.

11.21 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): It is estimated that 63% of people in Batley and Spen voted to leave the EU. Since then, if the recent YouGov poll is accurate, there has been a slight shift from leave to remain of about 10 percentage points, which obviously does not give either side a substantial majority. We are like so many other communities we have heard about tonight in that we are divided. That is broadly reflected in my mailbox, with revoking article 50, leaving with no deal and a second referendum all receiving significant support, and a smaller number of emails supporting the deal on the table. What is clear from all my correspondence is that the sense of feeling and emotion attached to our exit from the EU is substantial.

I have met people who have never voted before the referendum or since, but they were asked for their opinion and they gave it, not because they were resentful or racist but because they wanted a better future for themselves and their families. Our community has suffered disproportionately because of globalisation. Austerity, falling wages, insecure jobs and poor infrastructure have been the norm in our community, and those people saw a chance to make a change. For once, their opinion mattered and, whatever the outcome, the Government would implement it—to take back control, if you will—but restrictive red lines were put in place before common negotiating ground was found, and we have had one arm tied behind our back ever since.

The truth is that this House of Commons is too sensible to let us crash out, and the EU needs a relationship with us based on co-operation and sharing. Out there, away from the Westminster bubble, in a school hall in Batley and Spen, I received some testing and refreshing questions on Brexit. Clever young women such as Suffiya, Hannah, Jamila and Faezah wanted to know what the relationship with the EU will look like and how it will affect their future education, their families' small businesses, the curriculum and their opportunity to move around Europe. More troublingly, they wanted to know whether democracy is now officially dead. The fact is that too many of those questions, and many others, cannot be answered by the deal before us.

I will not be supporting the deal, but that does not give a green light to what a no deal would bring: lorry parks, a lack of cancer treatments and the stockpiling of drugs and food. Who does stockpiling hit the hardest? The poor. They cannot afford to stockpile food, and stockpiling by others means that prices rise. My food bank has seen a 50% rise in numbers due to austerity, and homelessness has doubled locally.

Those "ifs, buts and maybes" scenarios cannot distract us from the substantive issues before us and from what we know. An economic downturn is almost inevitable. An employer of over 600 people in my constituency—PPG

[Tracy Brabin]

paint—is facing concerns on more than one front. It imports raw materials, exports to the EU and works on a fast turnaround, and it needs support.

In this febrile atmosphere, we must lead from the front with calm and purpose. If we do not, the tensions I feel in community halls and pubs across my constituency will only get louder and angrier. With religious hate crimes up fivefold in the last five years, Batley and Spennings is at a tipping point. For some in Batley and Spennings, Tommy Robinson is a welcome visitor. We know that the far right is increasingly emboldened by this worst of all deals. The future of our country and our democracy is at stake. With the gap between leave and remain not definitive, we must compromise for the good of the nation and call a general election.

11.25 pm

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): There is a lot of opposition to the deal in the Chamber, and most people recognise that it is probably going to go down to defeat tomorrow night. This is the first time I have taken part in the debates on this issue; I have been involved in statements and urgent questions, but this is the first time I have spoken in the debate.

When I have looked around the Chamber and listened to the speeches, I have realised that a lot of the opposition is based on so many issues other than the actual deal on the table. It is based around whether people can get a general election, a second referendum or a reversal of the deal, or perhaps on whether it will help somebody's leadership hopes. Only a few people in here are ideologically opposed to the idea of any deal, and I respect them because it is a position they have held for a long time. They have a view that I disagree with and will try to argue against, but at least it is an honest position. The trouble is that when I talk to my constituents, I find that about 90% of them just want to get on with this. They just want the deal done and for us to move forward. Some 5% definitely want no deal, as they want nothing to do with Europe whatsoever, and 5% definitely want to reverse the deal, as they think it was terrible that we had a referendum in the first place. So 90% just want us to get on with it, and I believe that is what this deal delivers.

Do I like the backstop? No, I do not, but it is a compromise. I am willing to make the political judgment that we can move this forward, get to 29 March and leave the EU. We would be delivering on what I believe are most of the reasons why people voted to leave and, crucially, be protecting the economy while seeking the new trade deal. We can thus move things forward. I think that is roughly where most of my constituents are, too; they want to move things forward. I take issue with my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) for writing in *The Daily Telegraph* that hard Brexit was what people voted for when they voted for Brexit. He said they voted for no deal, but that is not true, as people were told, from the Brexit side, “You will be able to get a trade deal.”

Three areas concern me, with the first being no deal. I do not believe no deal works for this country. I look at small manufacturing organisations in my constituency, which feed up the supply chain to the big organisations

that export and that need the frictionless trade and the ability to move goods freely in just-in-time scenarios that have been built over many decades. They know that the knock-on effect will affect them directly. I honestly believe that if this decision was to be reversed, there would not be an international business in the world that would say, “Great, it is all over and done with. Let's invest in Britain.” Surely the question would be, “When are they going to change their mind again?” I also do not support a second referendum, because I do not see what it would actually deliver. This evening, I have probed Members who are supporting a second referendum and they have said it will have only two options: remain or take the deal. As I pointed out, the genie is out of the bottle. I do not think we can reverse the decision and remain; we need to get a solid trade deal and move forward.

Let me build on the comments made at the end of the speech by the hon. Member for Batley and Spennings (Tracy Brabin), for whom I have great respect. She is right to say that there is a growing far right sentiment, which has been uncovered, given a platform and empowered by this. A second referendum would surely be one of the most divisive and evil campaigns we have seen. It would be far worse than the last one, because we are seeing that raise its head; we are seeing it out on College Green, and it is being exploited by tendencies with no respect for democracy. So I fear that not only would we have a very nasty campaign, but we would not solve anything. If the second referendum came back in favour of the deal, we would still be having some similar arguments in here. By backing the deal, as I will do tomorrow night, I hope we will start to move the agenda forward and we can move on to the second stage of Brexit. I believe this deal delivers for about 90% of my constituents, and I wish this House would support it tomorrow night.

11.29 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): When people in Ilford North and throughout the country voted to leave, they did so for many reasons, but always with the promise and expectation of something better. So when this House votes tomorrow, there is only one question that we should ask of ourselves and the Government: will this deal leave us better off than the deal that we enjoy today?

It is abundantly clear that the promises made by the leave campaign cannot be kept. That campaign was never honest about the choices, compromises and trade-offs involved in leaving the most sophisticated political and economic alliance that the world has ever seen. The hubris of that campaign was astonishing, with claims of only upsides, not downsides; that we would hold all the cards and could choose the path we wanted; and that this would be the easiest trade deal in human history. Well, political gravity came to bite just as quickly as leading leavers left the Cabinet, faster than rats fleeing a sinking ship.

The Prime Minister claims that this is the best deal on offer. She tells us it is a better deal than any other third country enjoys with the European Union. She may be right, but what she cannot say is that this deal will make us better off than we would otherwise be as a member of the European Union. Every single analysis suggests that we will be worse off than we are today. This is not

what people voted for, which is why a constituency as divided on Brexit as mine is overwhelmingly united against the Prime Minister's deal.

It is time to stop pretending that there is a better deal to be had at this eleventh hour, and it is time for the Prime Minister to stop threatening Parliament and the people with the catastrophic consequences of no deal and to stop squandering billions of pounds on a prospect that she admits would bring catastrophe and ruin to this country, even as our public services are creaking and crumbling as a result of the cuts inflicted by her and her predecessors. It is reckless, irresponsible and beneath the office of Prime Minister.

It is also time for my own party to face up to some hard choices. There is no better Brexit. There is no jobs-first Brexit. There is not a Labour Brexit. Whichever way our party turns, we risk upsetting some of our voters. I do not envy the position in which the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Cabinet find themselves, but with our Parliament and our country still divided, the Labour party has a responsibility to lead, not simply follow, events. So let us speak now with clarity and conviction: our internationalist party has never believed that our country would be stronger, safer or better off outside the European Union. The bitterness and division that we have seen in recent weeks, months and years is only a taste of things to come as we face the prospect of years, if not decades, of wrangling about the future relationship that we may or may not have with the European Union. People throughout the country are demanding bigger answers on the housing crisis, on the national health service, on the future of our education system and on the future shape of the economy—an economy in which everyone genuinely has a stake, not just the privileged few.

The no deal demanded by the most hard-line leavers does not have the support of this House, and it would leave the poorest paying the heaviest price. It would be a painful Brexit. Although I respect those arguing at this late stage for a closer relationship through the single market or the customs union, that would be Brexit in name only, and it would not heal the divisions, either. It would be a most pointless Brexit.

I say particularly to Conservative Members who are cowed by constituency association chairmen what Winston Churchill said:

“What is the use of Parliament if it is not the place where true statements can be brought before the people?”

We were lied to. The promises that were made cannot be kept and will not be kept. It is time to put this issue back to the people. Let them decide between our future outside the European Union, now that they know what that looks like, and a people's vote to remain. I know which one I would choose, and I know which one I want my party to back.

11.33 pm

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): With regret, I cannot support this agreement, so I will vote against it tomorrow evening. That is not because I have ever been an ideological hard Brexiteer who advocated a clean break—I have always accepted that Brexit would lead to some compromises and a trade-off between a clean break and how close a relationship we wanted with the EU—but I do not believe that this deal is in the national

interest, not least because I do not see or hear any sign of any commitment to what the future relationship for which we are trading our control will be.

This deal does not actually achieve any part of Brexit. The people who voted to leave in the referendum—as two thirds of my constituents who voted did—gave us an instruction to leave. Parliament's triggering of article 50 and approval of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act took back control. The question before us in the withdrawal agreement is how much of that control we give away again in return for the sort of relationship that we want with the EU, but the problem is that we do not have that relationship set up. We are giving away whole chunks of control—for the next two years we are giving away almost all the control that we are taking back—and, more crucially, through the backstop that we are signing up to we are giving away our control over choosing the future partnership.

At the moment, we have a unilateral right to leave the EU. Once we approve the agreement, with that backstop in place, we will not have that choice any more. My fear with the backstop is not that we will not get a deal with the EU, but that the EU will only offer us a deal that involves much too close a relationship. It will almost certainly mean a stronger customs union than the backstop has, and more single market, and that will not be the Brexit that my constituents and this country voted for.

I agree with the Prime Minister when she says that we must deliver Brexit, and that not to do so would be a betrayal of the popular vote. My fear is that if we approve this agreement, we will not be able to deliver the Brexit that people voted for, and that is the real problem with it.

Two years ago, I would not have believed that this Government would bring to Parliament a deal for us to vote on that involved our paying £40 billion and giving away some of the control that we are taking back without having a future partnership in place. I would never have conceived of voting for that or of this House voting for that, and I suspect that, tomorrow, we will not. However, I recognise that we must find a way forward. To all those who will be in discussions over the next weeks on how to take this matter forward, I say that the only way forward is to reform the backstop so that we have an exit date, or to take the backstop out of the deal completely.

It is a ridiculous situation: something that is meant to be an insurance policy for the Irish may actually be the trigger for the hard border and the no-deal Brexit that they desperately do not want. Let us all be sensible about how we avoid whatever hard border that would be. I have been through the draft withdrawal document—all 500 and something pages of it—and there is still no definition of what a hard border is so that we can work out what we have to satisfy to get out of the backstop. I spent the early part of 2018, after the joint agreement, asking everybody I could to define the hard border that we had ruled out. Over the past year, I asked the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. We even went to Brussels to ask Michel Barnier to define the hard border that we were ruling out, and nobody would ever define what it was that we were guaranteeing not to have. That is the problem. How can we trust that we will ever get out of the backstop if we do not know what the requirements to get out of it are?

[Nigel Mills]

I say again that if this is meant to be an insurance policy, it would be a perverse situation if it brought about the calamity that it was trying to insure against. As I see it, the only way forward for us to leave the EU in an orderly manner and to avoid that so-called hard border is to fix the backstop or remove it. I urge the Government to try to negotiate that and the EU to agree to it, as that is the only way forward out of this.

11.37 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): In the past two years, Brexit has become that unspeakable subject. This Christmas, most of our constituents will have had a no-politics rule at their Christmas dinner table. We are now a divided nation—a nation where talking of shooting politicians, of violence and of traitors has become commonplace and normalised. The violence is matched with the arrogance—the arrogance that everybody is right and that, eventually, everybody else will realise that they should give in because the others were right all along. We caricature each other: the middle-class liberal elites and the northern working classes. For the past two years, this has become a country talking but not listening, and Brexit is at the heart of that. We claim that each other thinks the other is stupid, yet all the while no progress is being made. Little common ground is being found, and the public think that they hear little common sense.

There is one thing that we will all unite around. Tomorrow, the worst-kept plot twist in British politics will finally happen: we will have the vote on the Prime Minister's deal and it will not pass this place. With all the heckling that will come, all the briefing to the press, and all the WhatsApp messages, hostilities will not be suspended by that agreement; they will be escalated. Moreover, respect, the urgent virulent potion that this country so badly needs for its people and for its politicians, will be found nowhere. What effect will there be? We vote tomorrow against this deal, and nothing will change. I will be voting against this deal, but we will be no further forward as a country. Our precious time has been wasted at every single stage of this process. The can has been kicked so far down the road that it is in the rest of Europe. We have fudging, fixing, and knighthoods being promised and still the British public see the truth. They see medicines already being stockpiled, the ferries being bought, the EU citizens being made to pay to stay, the lorries being parked and the jobs being lost.

No wonder this was doomed from the start. The red lines that the Prime Minister set made getting a deal that could have a positive outcome impossible for anybody. There is no way of being outside institutions that can abolish borders without creating them ourselves. Of course there was going to need to be a backstop. The Prime Minister says that this is the best deal possible; it is really not. The entire shape of this deal has been defined by the desperate desire to end freedom of movement and leave the single market accordingly, but I know from the Chancellor's own figures what leaving the single market will do for my constituents and I know what not having freedom of movement will do for our public services and our economy. These red lines might have been red meat for the Brexiteers, but they will lead to many more of my constituents simply being in the red.

The truth is that I understand and respect everybody in this House for the views they hold and the responsibility that we all bear in finding what happens next. George Bernard Shaw said:

“Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.”

It is not enough for all of us to believe that we know what is right and think that will do.

Tomorrow we will vote against this deal, Chancellor; that is a given. But the day after and the day after that, the British public deserve that we find ways to listen and to work with them and hear their voices in finding a better deal. I believe that that comes from a people's vote and a citizens' assembly—I want to work with colleagues to look at those options—but above all I know that we have to work together. This country needs and deserves nothing less.

11.41 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) in this historic debate.

The process of leaving the European Union was designed at the outset to be extremely risky for any member state wishing to exit. Article 50, whether we like it or not, is our starting point. It is what has made this negotiation difficult and it is what makes this decision difficult. In deciding how to vote, I have spoken to constituents at public meetings and consulted many businesses. I have also used my own judgment, which is informed by 30 years of experience working in the car manufacturing, banking, technology and travel industries. But as somebody who voted to remain, I have also sought to honour the decision to leave. I am not of the view that the British people chose the wrong answer; they rarely do. We may be the House of Commons, but they are the true home of common sense. They can see what we all know, which is that the European Union is not perfect. It is unwilling to listen, unable to change and has been slow to react to major crises at our borders.

This deal delivers on the result of the referendum, but at the same time does not risk the jobs of my constituents. The largest employers in Chichester are Rolls-Royce Motor Cars, and farming and horticultural businesses. They, alongside employers across the UK, have invested based on the rules of the customs union and single market, and this has driven our strong economy. They have said loud and clear that switching to WTO rules at the end of March would be a disaster. Having spent 30 years working in these industries, I believe it would be highly irresponsible. The bodies representing large, small and medium-sized businesses, plus sectors including manufacturing, technology, education, science, farming, defence, retail and many others support this deal, as it enables them to continue to invest in the UK and protect jobs. These bodies represent more than half a million businesses and we ignore them at our peril.

This deal is a lower-risk Brexit, but is not without risk. We still have to turn the political declaration into a trade agreement, and this seems to be where many opponents to the deal lose their nerve. The United Kingdom has conducted these negotiations in good faith, in a way that does our country credit. There is a worrying trend of countries walking away from international agreements and commitments. We are not one of those countries.

The Government have secured a pragmatic way to proceed that we can build on, and we still have a strong negotiating hand; we always have had. We have a lot to offer any trading partner, not least one with which we have worked so closely for 45 years, including a large consumer market, innovative businesses, the City of London, a highly trusted legal system, security and intelligence capability, our armed forces, a nuclear deterrent, brilliant scientists and top universities—to name but a few. It makes sense to sell to us, it makes sense to partner with us and it makes sense to trust us.

It is difficult to find an alternative that does not pose huge risks to the economy or break faith with the result of the referendum. There are no alternatives that either do not outsource our trade policy to a third party or require us to continue with uncontrolled freedom of movement. Why would we give up now when we have a deal on the table that is better and more ambitious than all the others?

The Brexit debate has been dominated by those who have sought to admire the problem rather than try to solve it. The Prime Minister, by contrast, has achieved a balanced and sensible way forward. We are a divided country, but this deal charts a careful path to deliver on the referendum result without damaging our economy. This deal resonates with my experience. There are no easy answers, no silver bullets, no superhuman negotiators waiting to ride to the rescue—just a long, hard road ahead to deliver on what the British people voted for. Almost nobody in the UK regrets the decision not to join the euro. I believe that in years to come we will not regret our decision to leave the European Union.

11.45 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Glasgow Central constituency voted 71% to remain, and we certainly did not vote for this Government's deal and this tawdry Brexit that the Government are pursuing. I have constituents from the EU who come to my surgeries, come to my constituency office and stop me in the street, some who have been here for only a short time and some who have been here for decades. They are all deeply upset at how they are being treated by this UK Government, and they do not want any part of this. I am heartened, as well, by the numbers of constituents who are not originally from the EU—they are from Glasgow—but seek solidarity with those who are from the EU. They do not want to lose what we have gained in the city of Glasgow.

Glasgow won city of culture status in 1990, and over the decades the city has changed hugely. It has become a European city, and proudly so. Last year, in partnership with Berlin, we hosted the European championships, building on our sporting success from the Commonwealth games. We are proud to play our part in Europe. The culture of our city has been hugely improved as a result of our links with Europe. Scottish Ballet, our national company in Scotland, celebrates its 50th birthday this year, and we have many European dancers enhancing the company. Also based in my constituency is the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, which is over 125 years old, and, again, has many who come to it from around the world. They do not only bring talent to Scotland—they tour and share the glory that we have within our arts sector in the city with the rest of the world. We also have in my constituency the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland—

one of the top five institutions in the world—and the world-renowned Glasgow School of Art. Both of those institutions would struggle without access to European staff and European talent to come and share with other students.

We have Strathclyde University and Glasgow Caledonian University, which also make a huge contribution to the economy of Scotland and to wider culture within the city. There are 1,230 EU nationals working in higher or further education in Glasgow, and that is a huge bonus to our city. However, if the UK gets its way, we will struggle to continue to achieve this because there will be an 80% reduction in EU nationals coming to our country due to the thresholds in the immigration White Paper. The impact of that will be absolutely devastating for our city in so many ways.

I want to speak about the impact on young people in Glasgow. I am very proud that many organisations—youth organisations and others in schools—contribute through the Erasmus+ project. I spent some time with Pollokshields Primary School in my constituency. The pupils had more links with Pakistan than with Europe, but over the years the school has worked incredibly hard to build up its European links. I heard very passionately from pupils who had already been on exchanges with their partner school, Colegio Hernández in Valencia, about what that meant to them—how it had broadened their horizons and meant that they could go out into the world and try new things, learn new things and have new experiences.

I do not forgive this Government, and I will never forgive this Government, for making the future so much greyer for our children in the years ahead. This Government want to make this country smaller, whereas Scotland wants to look outwards to the world, to participate in the world, to send our people outwards and to bring people inwards. We want to celebrate the things that we hold dear and the things that we have in common. Scotland wants to be a part of that world. We want no part of this insular, devastating Brexit that will cause so much pain.

11.49 pm

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I rise in support of the Prime Minister's withdrawal agreement, and I do so because I believe in compromise. That word is not very popular in our current politics. As the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) said, everybody believes that they are right all the time and refuses to see where we can find common ground. In a 52:48 nation, the Prime Minister needed to find common ground and a balanced compromise, and this deal reflects that.

For those who voted remain, like me, this deal gives a two-year transition period, an unprecedented partnership on security, agreement on citizens' rights and the pathway to a deep trading relationship. For those who voted leave, this deal means that we are leaving the European Union, the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy and ending free movement. If we want high alignment with the European Union, we can choose that, and if we want low alignment, we can choose that too. Many Government and Opposition Members who do not want us to be part of the European Union would have bitten David Cameron's arm off if he had offered them this deal a few years before the referendum. We should all consider that.

[*Bim Afolami*]

In the time remaining, I would like to examine what happens if we end up with no deal. We have heard from many Members about how devastating that would be. I urge anybody who thinks that no deal is not necessarily a good idea but will not be that bad and is manageable to speak to manufacturing businesses, retail businesses, agricultural bodies such as the National Farmers Union and the Country Land and Business Association, and the many senior civil servants who have worked on these issues in Government and know the parlous state of things.

We must also examine what “WTO rules” really means. The tariffs and quotas would need to be negotiated individually, country by country, and we should not expect every single country to accept those unilaterally. There would be a negotiation, and that would take time. All the countries are watching this debate. They would see the difficulty we are in and may seek to take advantage of that. It would not be straightforward. Some people say, “We’ll just have zero tariffs on everything to make things easier.” We could do that, but if we did, we would need to have zero tariffs for every single country, because to do the contrary would be against WTO rules. What would that do to manufacturing in various parts of the economy and to agriculture, which would be suffering from the consumer shock of a no-deal Brexit? There are other areas not covered by WTO rules. I am sure that we could work those out over time, but they would need to be negotiated with the European Union, and how easy would the negotiation be if we had walked away from the withdrawal agreement and refused to pay the money and fulfil our agreed obligations?

Some suggest that this agreement puts us in a poor negotiating position, and I think it is fair to say that it will be a difficult negotiating position. We are one country against 27. That will be difficult. It will also be difficult to get the 27 to agree, because they will have divergent interests, but that was always going to be the case, whether it is a WTO exit or a negotiated exit such as this. In my last seconds, I would like to urge the Government to speak to Members across the House if this deal does not succeed and consider—

Mr Speaker: Order.

11.53 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (*Bim Afolami*). I rise to oppose the Government’s motion and to give largely the speech that I was due to make a month ago, when the vote was pulled. My stance has developed over the past two and a half years, during which my party has campaigned consistently in Parliament and in communities across the country for the people, not the politicians, to have the final say.

As we approach the denouement of this Brexit drama—or perhaps it is a tragedy—my thoughts drift back to 24 June 2016. What prompted the country to vote for Brexit? I agree with the hon. Member for Bournemouth West (*Conor Burns*). An entire generation faced the prospect that their children and grandchildren would not be as well off as they were, having been left behind and failed by globalisation. More than two years

later, I do not believe that this Government have provided either any solutions to those issues or a coherent way ahead.

We have heard a lot this evening, mostly from Conservative Members, about delivering on Brexit. May I plead with them that actually we have something more important in this House to deliver, and that is the wellbeing of the country? When the electors go to the ballot box and send us here, it is not simply to follow an instruction; it is to have the courage to do what we believe is right for us, for them and for the entire country. That is where we are just now.

While I remain implacably opposed to any EU departure, I believe that on this decision—possibly the most important decision any of us will face politically—it was important to take the time to seek the advice and listen to the views of my constituents in Edinburgh West. My constituents voted remain, and their minds have not changed. If anything, they are firmer in their resolve that this chaotic, uncertain shambles of a Brexit is not what they wanted or deserved.

This deal, the best deal the Government could negotiate, will, even according to the Government, leave us less well off than staying in the European Union. Our constituents deserve better. All of those people who voted leave deserve better. They voted leave believing what they were told—that it would benefit the NHS—and now they discover that the NHS will lose vital staff. In Edinburgh, we have Scotland’s highest concentration of non-UK EU citizens: 39,000 people who are vital to staffing our universities and our tourist industry. Some 50% of those who work in hospitality in Edinburgh come from elsewhere in the European Union.

We have talked before about stockpiling medicines and food and about lorry jams. When I ask this Government for reassurances, I am worried not just about my health or the health of all my friends who are worried about the medicines they need, but about the health of the country. That is why, when the Prime Minister called on us earlier this evening not to block Brexit because that would be a “subversion of democracy” and not say to the people whom we were elected to serve that we were unwilling to do what they had instructed and would go against it, I say to the Prime Minister that that is not why they sent us here. They sent us here to have the courage and the wisdom to stand up for what we believe is best for the country—and that is not this deal.

11.57 pm

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (*Christine Jardine*).

The outcome of the referendum in Taunton Deane reflected exactly the national average—52% leave, 48% remain—and I am committed to respecting the outcome. However, I believe this means not just who won and who lost, but the balance of the vote. I hear the leave side saying there was a roar for change, but if 17.4 million people represent a roar, I put it to hon. Members that 16.1 million must represent a loud growl.

I voted remain, but I have never been fearful of leaving. In fact, I am astonished by how many people agree that this was a very difficult decision, with many shades of grey, but then suddenly seem to find it so

absolutely black and white. For two and a half years, I have listened to the same dominant voices, many of great intellect. Among these I put my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), but look how polarised their views are. No one has a monopoly on wisdom, and no single person on either side has all of the answers.

I came into Parliament after a long career working as a team member. I believe that party politics can function properly only if we act as a team, and I am saddened that not everybody seems to see it this way. Extricating ourselves from the tentacles of a 40-year relationship with 27 other countries is no mean feat. The negotiations have been long and complex, but certainly not inept. I have yet to hear a speech in this House that convinces me that anyone would have made a better fist of it than our Prime Minister. It is clear to me, however, that we must find a way through this with good will and compromise.

My view is to support a deal that gains the most for the most people, respecting the balance of the vote—in other words, leaving—while, crucially, respecting the needs of business. Business in Taunton Deane has been at pains to point this out to me at every stage and to urge that we get on with the deal so that we can move on, while at the same time keeping close links with the EU and frictionless trade. That was stressed to me vehemently by the head of Pritex, a company in Wellington that makes soundproofing for cars. It has also been stressed by food manufacturers, the main industry in the south-west, and sheep farmers in particular, who rely almost entirely on the EU for their exports.

While the deal works for those people, it also works for the many companies that are already trading on the world stage. Many of them, such as Somerdale cheese and Sheppy's cider, want to go many steps further, and this deal also works for them. Our nine trade commissioners are at this very moment forging opportunities that we can sign up to once the deal is over the line. For me, one of the most exciting opportunities that the deal offers is the chance to leave the common agricultural policy and the fisheries policy and to recreate our own land use strategy. That is a real opportunity, and we have already started, through the Agriculture Bill and the Fisheries Bill, so let us get it right.

This deal may not be perfect, but it does enable us to move forward. I believe that I have personally moved a great way towards this deal, because I was originally a remainer, and would urge other colleagues to move forward too. Let us do it not just for the people in this House but for the young people out there too, like my son, who has just gone to university. I promised him that when he gets out in a few years' time, this will be done and dusted. He and his generation will be part of the generation that will forge a new era, for which we are paving the way right now. I urge colleagues to support the deal.

12.1 am

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Seventy per cent. of my constituents voted remain in June 2016. From my inbox of about 5,000 letters and emails, over 90% take the same view. Indeed, more than 20% of Hammersmith and Fulham residents are EU27 citizens, which is the third largest proportion anywhere in the UK.

That helps to make Hammersmith a very good place to live, but also to do business. At Christmas, Novartis announced that it was moving its UK headquarters to the new Imperial College life sciences campus at White City. L'Oréal has its UK and Ireland HQ in Hammersmith Broadway. West London is the European centre of commercial broadcasting. If I take SMEs, we are proud to have Charlie Bigham's at Park Royal, employing 500 people in the UK's fastest growing ready meals business, and Jascots wine merchants, importing wine for the restaurant trade and employing 50 people in Old Oak. These are very different enterprises with one thing in common: a fear of a chaotic Brexit. Whether it is the need to stockpile drugs, planning for a weaker UK market, offshoring to meet EU licensing rules, higher trading costs, skills and labour shortages or border checks, Brexit is a disaster for UK business.

It should not be necessary to go beyond economic arguments in rejecting the Prime Minister's deal, or no deal or all the halfway houses that will make our country poorer by an act of our own will. However, there are equally compelling social, cultural and political reasons for wanting to stay part of a great project that has in a few decades transformed one of the most conflicted regions of the world into one of the most harmonious and which gives more opportunities for the next generation than any before. The EU has been an agent for peace, democracy and security within its own expanding borders. Following the collapse of dictatorships in Greece, Portugal and Spain, the EU offered an alternative and more attractive path, as it has for former Warsaw pact countries. This is a job half-finished, however, as recent events in Poland and Hungary have shown. It is one in which the UK has a leading part to play, not one from which we should retreat. In an increasingly dangerous age for democracy and human rights, when the demagogues are in charge even in the United States, the EU can be a force for rationalism and liberalism. We weaken that struggle, but we also put ourselves at risk, if we abandon our position on the international stage.

I do not believe that a majority of the British people voted to make their families poorer, to weaken employment rights, environmental standards and Britain's place in the world, to alienate 3.5 million of their fellow citizens or to deny to succeeding generations the freedom to travel, live and work freely across our continent. If the Prime Minister will neither lead in the interests of the country nor hand over to someone who will, we must ask the public to save us from ourselves, call a people's vote, and have confidence that this self-harming will end and we will make an informed choice to remain in the European Union.

12.4 am

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): I spent eight years campaigning against European integration. I worked for the successful campaign against joining the euro and I ran the campaign for a referendum on the European constitution. If, during those eight years, I had been told that I could have this withdrawal agreement I would have jumped at the chance. This is a deal that means we take back control over immigration, we stop paying £10 billion a year into the EU, we no longer have to follow new EU laws, and, above all, we get out of the process of ever-closer union and we stop giving away more and more powers every year.

[Neil O'Brien]

What is the alternative to this deal? I believe that if the withdrawal agreement is voted down tomorrow we will end up with no Brexit. A majority in this House will vote to keep us in the EU, as many people have argued for this evening either overtly or in a thinly disguised form. I do not like it, but that is what will happen if the deal is voted down.

Some people I respect are worried about the backstop. It seems to be something that our friends in Europe should be far more worried about using than we should. Under the backstop, we would be able to access the EU market with no taxes or tariffs, and unlike any other country in the world we would be able to do that without having to follow new EU laws. No wonder that, according to the *Financial Times*:

“EU diplomats are nervous because they fear Britain would have ‘one foot’ in Europe’s market, enjoying tariff-free access and no rules of origin, while ruthlessly undercutting the standards of the EU’s single market.”

In other words, the backstop would take us back to the idea of a basic common market and away from the political union that the EU has become.

The last two years of negotiations have been very painstaking, but the Prime Minister has delivered some clear successes. The EU originally said that the four freedoms could not be divided and there was no chance of accessing the EU market without having free movement. She has won on that. Spain originally said that it wanted to get back control of Gibraltar, but as the First Minister of Gibraltar told me in person this is a deal that protects Gibraltar absolutely. The EU then wanted to have a customs backstop only for Northern Ireland and to put a customs border down the Irish sea. Again, the Prime Minister has seen off that threat. Those are three good, big successes.

It is very striking to me that all the main national business groups in this country support the deal: the Federation of Small Businesses, the British Chambers of Commerce, the CBI, the EEF, the National Farmers Union and the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation are all backing it. The voice of business is clear: they want us to get on and back the deal. But there is more to the deal than keeping business moving, so let me finish with a bit of history.

I believe it was a mistake by Ted Heath to say there would be no loss of sovereignty when we joined the European Economic Community. In the 1980s, it was a mistake not to see the revolutionary consequences of the Single European Act, which Mrs Thatcher came to regret. In the '90s and the '00s, it was a mistake for successive Governments to push through the treaties of Maastricht, Amsterdam, Nice and Lisbon without ever putting them to the people in a referendum. If we turn down this deal, it will be another historic mistake: a mistake for those of us who oppose European integration, because the trap will snap shut and the majority in this House who want to stop Brexit will do so and we will have snatched defeat from the jaws of victory; and in the longer term I think it will also be a mistake for those on the other side, too. Imagine the bitterness of a country where 52% of people feel that their wishes had been overridden. They will feel that this country is not really a democracy anymore.

It does not have to be like that. This is a good deal. It gives us full control over immigration; stops us paying in billions every year; gives us control over future laws; and gets us out of ever closer union. On the other hand, it keeps trade flowing and gives us a framework to keep co-operating with our friends in Europe on science, culture, security and the environment. The withdrawal agreement, or something like it, is the only thing that can unite and move this country forward. I support it in the strongest possible terms.

12.8 am

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Like all colleagues, I have been inundated with emails from my constituents about the withdrawal agreement vote in December and the one coming up later today. For those who worry that MPs do not read their emails, I would just say: Chris from Scartho wants to remain; Pete on the Willows wants a closer deal than is offered by the current deal; I hear that Sue in Yarborough wants a clean break regardless of Northern Ireland, jobs or wages being impacted; and Christopher in the same area is telling me that I should reject this calamitous Chequers betrayal and we should just leave. I hear all those views. I hear the 70% of the people in my borough who voted to leave. I understand that, but just 11 of all the emails I have received tell me to back the Prime Minister’s deal.

I would like to touch on two specific issues and why I am disappointed by the Prime Minister’s approach with her parliamentary colleagues. On Friday, I wrote to her asking why, less than a week before her vote on the withdrawal agreement, she was apparently considering accepting an amendment that asserted an increase in assurances over workers’ rights. That consideration tells me that her agreement fails to protect people’s rights at work. In that letter, I pointed out that I gave her the opportunity two years ago to quell any fears or concerns that colleagues might have about reductions in protections for workers by adopting a Bill I had put forward. At that time, I was repeatedly and patronisingly told by Government Members that I did not need to worry, because domestic rights are greater than those in the EU and apparently the Tories are the party of and for workers. That is quickly to forget their voting against the introduction of the national minimum wage, their retrograde trade union legislation, the Beecroft report, which proposed being able to fire staff for any reason whatever, and the introduction of tribunal fees, which saw a 70% drop in employment claims.

People might see those practical examples alongside some of the comments the Prime Minister’s colleagues have made about wanting a bonfire of red tape or about workers’ rights being unsustainable or a burden. That would cause anyone to question how she could have the brass neck to suggest that her party is one for ordinary working people, let alone one to trust once the protection of overarching, worker-friendly EU legislation is removed.

Despite the best intentions of my colleagues with their proposed amendment, I fail to see how a passing reference of just a few lines can substitute for the detailed considerations and fully worked out suggestions of the full Bill that was put forward. If the Prime Minister is genuinely committed to the protections, how is it that not one person from her Government has ever sought to discuss any of those principles with me or

Labour Front Benchers? It has taken until this week for her to go and talk to the TUC and the major trade unions.

I have said to my constituents that the deal is a vague, worst-of-both-worlds Brexit that satisfies neither leave nor remain supporters. Worse than that, it fails to convince people like me, who despite campaigning for remain have said that they will respect the outcome of the referendum and are committed to getting the best possible deal for our constituents, protecting jobs, job opportunities and their rights. For my constituents in Grimsby, part of that is about seeking support for fish processing. When I last asked the Chancellor about his discussions with Norway and Iceland, he was incredibly dismissive and talked about the UK becoming an independent coastal state and failed to answer questions around the trading relationships that Norway and Iceland have, which will impact on their ability to have any kind of free negotiations with us. We will be listening from the other side of the door when they are negotiating, waiting to see what kind of scraps will be thrown to us through the transition phase.

12.12 am

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn). Perhaps I just need to remind the House that we voted to leave the EU, and “leave the EU” is a very simple instruction that somewhere along the path has lost its clarity and intent. I am saddened by those who seem intent on sabotaging Brexit within this place, resorting to any tactic to achieve their aim. I am utterly confident that you, Mr Speaker, will ensure that the rules and procedures of this place are maintained and honoured.

We are potentially witnessing parliamentary anarchy from those who somehow think that their vote was more important than other people’s votes. I think they feel that those who voted to leave the EU are simply wrong, deluded, xenophobic or even stupid. They are not; they are far-sighted, courageous and aspirational. They have a vision for the United Kingdom that will once again place us in charge of our destiny. I tend to feel that remainers operate from a place of fear, apocalyptic warnings of doom and gloom spilling from their mouths at regular intervals, but I must tell them that the Brexit genie is out and will continue to roam our island nation until we eventually leave the EU, even if that aim is thwarted in the short term.

Can we not forget that we voted by 554 to 53 to allow the people of this country to decide our fate in or out of the EU? They decided, and we invoked article 50, and that has brought us here. All this did not happen by accident. Today, many of those same MPs are doing their best to thwart that vote. What a pyrrhic victory it would be for those remainers to see this place trash its reputation, integrity and honour, simply because—let me repeat it—they think their votes are more significant than anyone else’s. Trust in politics, already at an all-time low, would evaporate. Why would we bother to canvass at the next election? Who in their right mind would believe a word we said?

The Prime Minister is wrong now to threaten no Brexit at all. It used to be “my deal or no deal”; now it is “my deal or no Brexit”. Sadly, this is another example of why we are in this mess. It is disingenuous to claim

that there are only two choices. As we have heard, the deal is, I regret to say, a dog’s dinner. We would remain a vassal state, facing a serious threat to the Union itself, in the backstop, and subject to binding rules from the ECJ. Let us not forget either the £39 billion we would raid from our challenged Treasury safe, and for what? If the Prime Minister’s deal is voted down tomorrow night, she must return to the EU and attempt to negotiate a better one, for we do want one—we really do want a deal. At the same time, leaving the EU on WTO terms must be given top priority. Do I need to remind the House that this is the current legal default position?

Unless we honour the referendum result, politics in this country will suffer demonstrably.

12.16 am

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Good morning, Mr Speaker. I, too, was hoping to catch your eye on 10 December, but the Prime Minister saw to that when she cancelled the debate. When I saw there was a prime ministerial statement today, I wondered if it was Groundhog Day.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), and the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) who spoke from the Front Bench from the Labour party, on their speeches about the benefits of immigration and being pro-immigration. I hope that the Chancellor, too, will congratulate both hon. Members, because there is a real concern about the Government’s direction of travel on immigration. We have already heard of individuals applying for universal credit who have lived here for 20 or 30 years, and worked and contributed to the economy, but who, because they were born outside the UK, are being denied universal credit or are receiving questions from the Department for Work and Pensions. I hope the Chancellor will take that back.

I hope the Government will also look at the advertisements for the EU settlement scheme. It seems quite inappropriate that they are seeking to charge people to retain rights and benefits they already have. I am very concerned, too, about what the deal would do for the protection of workers’ rights. As Opposition Members have said, there are too many vague assurances, when what we actually need is a binding agreement. We need to look at the EU’s direction of travel. It is now seeking to introduce changes to improve the work-life balance of parents and to help those in the gig economy. It is far better than the timid approach adopted here in the UK. We are seeing in Europe a real determination to put in place transparent and predictable working conditions.

While the EU is going in that direction, there is a fear among trade unions here about the lack of enforcement, particularly during the transition period, when disputes will be brought to a joint committee. The difficulty with that is that individuals and trade unions will not be able to take those complaints directly to the disputes committee or the European Court of Justice.

We have heard many Conservative Back Benchers talk about the benefits of trade agreements. What will happen for individuals in trade unions, who under international trade agreements are often excluded from bringing challenges under those agreements to enforce their rights at work? It is clear to me that the Government, who spent years challenging in court the trade unions’

[Chris Stephens]

argument that tribunal fees should not be put in place, who were responsible for the anti-trade-union Act, and who take a timid approach and refuse to ban zero-hours contracts, cannot be trusted on workers' rights and protections and the EU protections currently in place.

Finally, some argue that the EU is a neoliberal institution, but a no deal would lead to even more neoliberalism. The answer to that criticism of the EU is not more neoliberalism. We saw that in the financial crash, when there was criticism of neoliberalism. We do not need more of that; we need less, and we need far more protections at work and elsewhere.

12.21 am

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): Like most of coastal Britain, Waveney and Lowestoft voted to leave. There was a variety of reasons why individuals made that choice, but I sense that many were sending an overarching message down to us here in the Westminster bubble. Yes, economically, Britain as a whole has done well over the past 40 to 50 years, but during that time coastal Britain has struggled. In Lowestoft, the fishing industry is a pale shadow of its former self. The canning factory has closed, the coachworks have gone and the Sanyo TV factory—the last major TV manufacturer in the UK—was shut down in 2009.

The message that Brexit sent from towns such as Lowestoft is that they have not done well in this period and we need to do something different. As the negotiations and debates drag on, we must never forget that message. When it came to those negotiations, there was always going to be a need for hard bargaining, making difficult choices and, yes, making concessions. The negotiations on fishing have not been straightforward. I had hoped that the UK would resume its role as an independent coastal state from December 2019; instead, we hope to do so by the end of December 2020. That said, as matters stand, we shall control access to our waters, deciding who can access them on what terms. That is something that the EU—the French and Dutch, in particular—do not like, but the Prime Minister has steadfastly refused to compromise and it is important that she continues to do so to provide the opportunity to revive the East Anglian fishing industry.

Ultimately, I ask myself whether the deal delivers Brexit. From a pragmatic perspective, on balance, I believe that it does. I look at the alternatives. They are not particularly palatable. Leaving the EU with no deal in place has many risks. There is a push for a second referendum. To my mind, that would be very wrong. It would significantly undermine the very ethos of democracy and the very many people who voted for Brexit would lose all confidence in the democratic process.

Something missing from the Brexit debate since before the referendum is the vision for the UK in the future. This country has many immediate challenges to address such as welfare reform and housing, but there is an exciting future ahead and we must set out how we will deliver it for the benefit of all our citizens. To deliver such a vision, we need a Brexit deal in place. The one in front of us—it is the only one—is, I believe, on balance, acceptable, so I will be voting for it. That said, I sense that tomorrow it will be defeated. But it is the nearest we have to delivering Brexit, to delivering a deal, and to

honouring our pledge to the British people. In the next few days, people need to be pragmatic and work together to get the deal over the line.

12.24 am

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): This is the issue on which I—and, I am sure, most other Members—have been contacted most by constituents. They have all asked me to represent their views, but in the time available it will simply not be possible to do all of them justice, especially given the contradictory and incompatible messages that I have received.

Wherever it ends up, this process will cause a huge group of people to feel disenfranchised and disconnected from the political process. The binary nature of the referendum has created a schism in society, splitting families and friends in a way that will take years to fix. The longer the process continues, the wider those cracks become, and many issues are not receiving the attention that they need because Brexit, and many of the causes of Brexit, are not being addressed. Those are the big issues that I want us, as a country, to tackle. Brexit has sucked the life out of all other political debate in the country, and has toxified dialogue in the process. The danger is that the position could become even worse if we cannot be seen to be trusted—if democracy is no longer seen as something that works—and my starting point is what this process means for democracy.

I voted in favour of a referendum, and I did so in the expectation that the result would be binding. I campaigned to remain, so of course I was disappointed by the result, but as a democrat I accepted it. Moreover, along with many other Members, I had been re-elected on a manifesto that had confirmed that I would abide by the result.

Plenty of constituents have expressed their frustration and anger at the posturing that goes on here. Their perception is that too many Members are using Brexit as a vehicle for their own ends. I have no issue with Members who have been honest from the start about their wish to stop Brexit—especially when that represents the overwhelming view of their constituents—but there is an undercurrent that implies that unless Members unquestioningly accept the Government's interpretation of Brexit, they are really trying to stop it. I find that insulting, I find it puerile, but, most seriously, I find it dangerous, because it says to people out there that we are insincere, that we are playing games, and that we are too wrapped up in our own egos to govern effectively. Some people say that the vote was for Parliament to take back control. That does not mean that MPs should always do what the Government want; in fact, it should mean that MPs are free to do the opposite.

We are in this mess because there was a division in the Tory party and a referendum was seen as the way to heal that division, but rather than bringing people together, it has pushed them further apart. The division has seeped out into the rest of the country, and political dialogue has become so polarised that many people with different views have stopped listening to one another. Of course, the irony is that many who voted leave and remain alike are opposed to this deal, but the reasons that they give are so diametrically opposed that any consensus will not last endure past what is now today.

A few of my constituents have said that I should support the Prime Minister's deal, but if the best arguments are about what might happen if Members vote against

something rather than giving positive reasons for them to vote in favour of it, it must be accepted that the offer cannot stand on its own two feet. I am not falling for the bluff of a no deal, and I refuse to be threatened by something that I know no responsible Prime Minister would allow.

We must restore trust, and the first step towards doing that is to be honest. We cannot pretend that this agreement is anything other than a desperate fudge, the embodiment of weak leadership, and a mish-mash of contradiction that needs radical revision if it is to be passed. It does nothing to address the fundamental issues that we need to address in order to create a society that works for us all. We must be candid and recognise that whatever route we take now, it will come at a cost. Some of the costs are easier to quantify than others, and none are certain. We will probably also need more time to sort ourselves out. However, it is up to us, here in Parliament, to show leadership and find a solution that brings people back together, protects our national interest, and restores faith in the democratic process.

12.28 am

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is an honour to speak for a brief few minutes in this historic debate, and an honour to follow the passionate speech of the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders).

As someone who has travelled throughout the glorious continent of Europe and can be described as a member of the easyJet generation, I believe deeply in the values of international co-operation. I have long wished to be a member of a reformed EU, but when the United Kingdom tried to renegotiate the terms of its membership, it became very clear that this was an inflexible, undemocratic body that was not going to reform in the way that we would like. I therefore decided to vote to leave, on the basis that the EU was heading for an undemocratic federalism that the UK has never desired, and, above all, because I wanted to see our historic democratic parliamentary freedoms preserved.

Having become the MP for west Oxfordshire after the referendum and with 17.4 million people nationally having voted to leave, I am keen to ensure that Brexit reflects the best long-term interests of this country to ensure that our country remains open, democratic and free. I passionately want to ensure that when constituents from all parts of the country go to see their MP, that MP sits in a Parliament that is able to make change, and that we are a functioning democracy where the laws that govern the country and the country's destiny are made here by elected politicians.

The withdrawal agreement has much to commend it. There are a multitude of technical but important points that govern interconnected peoples, such as the resolution on citizens' rights, but I have decided, with the greatest pain, that I cannot support it in its current form.

The backstop is the headline act. We are all tired of hearing about it, but we must consider what it means. The backstop would see the UK remain in a hybrid customs union with the EU, whereby the UK would fully align itself to the EU's customs regime, including its external tariff schedule, and we would be unable to sign meaningful trade agreements with other countries. The UK's home market, let us not forget, is the fifth largest in the world and would become a bargaining counter for EU negotiators to exchange for benefits for

their own countries, because they would not be required to reciprocate on their trade deals. It seems to me unthinkable for a country of our standing and proud history to surrender control of our trade policy to an organisation of which we will no longer be a member and which will have no regard for our interests.

I know I will be told that this is all temporary, but even if technically temporary, the backstop has every likelihood of being indefinite, with the EU effectively holding a veto over our ability to leave. Even under article 50 we have a clear, legal, sovereign right to exit our arrangements, but not here. There is no unilateral exit mechanism from the backstop, nor is it time-limited. This is almost unheard of in international relations.

I cannot emphasise enough that I do not criticise this deal on the basis that it is not ideal, or that it is not perfect, or that I want more. This is no objection based on some ideological purity; I am a pragmatist and I want to see a deal and a compromise as much as anybody. But I cannot agree to just anything, and I feel it is best if we in this place speak our minds. We should be able to tell the British people that sometimes a compromise becomes a compromise too far. This deal gives £39 billion without serious commitments in response, divides our Union and leaves the UK at the mercy of the ECJ in practice if not in name.

We should never be ashamed to say that it is noble for a country to seek democratic, accountable self-government and live in amity with its neighbours. It is for that that we must strive.

12.32 am

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): It gives me pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts).

The debate on our relationship with the EU has been dominated today by slogans and emotion, but it is actually about our trade arrangements, which are a very practical matter. It is business that is most affected, and what amazes me is that this Government, who constantly preach to those of us on the Opposition side of the House about not being on the side of business, never sat down with businesses to work out what they needed from our deal with the EU.

I have sat down with the businesses in my constituency, both individually and at business summits, to see what they want from our deal, and they have a wide variety of concerns. The biggest is regulatory divergence, the threat of which is already preventing companies in my constituency from tendering for contracts. They are worried about tariffs and import duties, which raise their costs, and about losing EU funding in grants and loans from the European Investment Bank, which have already reduced from £7 billion a year to just £2 billion in 2017 and will restrict investment in our businesses even more. They worry about the cost and paperwork of visas, making it harder and more expensive to access skills and for their people to move around Europe. They worry about access to the single euro payments area and the VAT information exchange system. These may be boring issues, but they are very real and very practical for all our businesses. They worry about losing their access to free trade not just with the EU but with the 65 countries to which they get preferential free trade access, with a further 25 agreements due to take effect. They also worry about friction at our borders, which will make just-in-time production impossible and lead to late payments if contracts cannot be fulfilled in time.

[Ruth George]

It is no wonder that the small and medium-sized businesses in my constituency are in despair. Several have already had to set up offices in, and transfer jobs to, EU countries to continue bidding for contracts. It was also reported last week that the banking sector has already moved almost £1 trillion out of the UK, equating to 10% of its assets. The longer we go on with no practical deal in sight, the more businesses will continue to move. So far, we have been cushioned against the full economic impact of the leave vote by the drop in the value of the pound, but we have started to see inflation creeping up and things are becoming more expensive.

Our deal with the EU affects not only businesses but people. Yes, a majority of people voted in 2016 to leave the European Union, and I respect that, but this Government did not respect those people enough to ask them what they wanted from that deal. I asked all the voters in High Peak what they wanted, and half of those who voted leave wanted to stay in a customs union and half wanted access to the single market. The Government have not listened to them, and we have ended up with a deal that is not a deal. It is simply a stopgap until the end of next year and provides no certainty for the future. The only certainty is years of wrangling over a final deal, as the Conservative party wrangles over who its next leader will be and the potential leaders offer alternative versions of our final deal. The Prime Minister can give us no commitments about that deal. She has opted out of leading us into it.

12.36 am

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): The choice is stark: we can either follow the wishes of the majority and deliver Brexit, as my constituents overwhelmingly voted for, or we can fail and risk holding them in contempt. We must not fail. We must deliver. However, there are now very few realistic options open to the House. I fear that there is now a growing risk of no Brexit at all, especially following the passing of a number of amendments in the past month in the name of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve). The fact that those amendments were passed shows that there is an appetite among Members to ignore and frustrate the will of the British people. Either they would leave us saddled with a horrific Norway-style deal or, shockingly, they could mean that we do not leave at all.

As an MP representing a predominantly leave seat, I can tell the House that no Brexit is not an option. It would hold the electorate and our democracy in total contempt, yet that is precisely what supporters of a second referendum are asking us to do. They are asking us to delay Brexit by at least a year, and they want to prevent us from leaving on 29 March. That is not a choice that I could contemplate, as it would involve deepening divisions instead of healing them and going back on our word instead of respecting the people's choice. It is concerning that we are seeing a rise in extremist views on both the far left and the far right. It was not easy to see off the British National party in Stoke-on-Trent, as we had to do, and I would not be so cavalier as to assume that that threat has gone away.

I will vote tomorrow to secure the Brexit that people in Stoke-on-Trent South want to see: an end to free movement, and control over our own money and laws. Essentially, that means leaving the single market and the customs union. Indeed, anyone who does not accept that Brexit means leaving the single market and the customs union is deluding themselves. Staying within the customs union would tie us permanently to the trade policies of the EU, preventing us from forging stronger links globally.

I agree that a managed no deal could be beneficial and would not have the apocalyptic impact that some have predicted, but I fear that delivering no deal in an orderly way is now far from certain. Given what has been witnessed here over the past week, the numbers in this House are quite likely to be stacked against allowing no deal. Members could obstruct the necessary legislation for managing the process, thereby frustrating Brexit. The worst case would be a disorderly no deal—crashing out of the EU—and according to a number of my local businesses, that would be incredibly disruptive for our local economy and jobs in Stoke-on-Trent. That is not what the people of Stoke-on-Trent voted for, so I am left to consider what is before us. The withdrawal agreement delivers much of what my constituents voted for: control of immigration at our borders; the protection of manufacturing; the ending of vast annual transfers of money to Brussels; and a commitment to the creation of a new free trade area with the EU, building on the global opportunities for forging new trade.

However, the backstop is what really worries me, and concerns expressed many times throughout the House must be addressed. We cannot get trapped in something that is indefinite and challenges the very being of our sovereignty. I look to support the amendment in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), which would time-limit the backstop. The Government need to be sure that safeguards are in place.

I have consistently voted for measures to ensure that this House enacts Brexit. I must make a choice, as we all do, based on weighing up the risks on both sides, and I have spent many weeks determining my decision. The vast majority of my constituents are fed up with politicians and want us to get on with delivering Brexit. They want us to get on to pursue the fantastic new opportunities for global Britain that will benefit every community throughout our Union that has felt left behind until now. They want us to deliver the leave that they voted for, honouring the result of the referendum and regaining control on 29 March.

12.40 am

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): We have come a long way since June 2016. There is no more hiding from the fact that any Brexit will leave us worse off and that the best that any post-Brexit Government can do is damage limitation. If we go ahead with Brexit, we will have to find new ways of stimulating the economy. No longer bound by EU rules, those who argue for slashing regulations will quickly gain the upper hand. The race to the bottom will soon begin.

Among the first regulations on the bonfire will be those that protect the environment. The European Court of Justice, so hated by Brexit fanatics, has been an outstanding protector of environmental laws and

regulations. The Government's recent draft environment Bill does not include a watchdog with anything like the power of the ECJ, and climate action will lose out. There will be an increased incentive to support fossil fuel companies for short-term economic gain. Green energy projects are becoming increasingly affordable and promise long-term economic gain, but they still require up-front investment and will therefore be the first victims. Who would provide such investment in a struggling post-Brexit economy? Once more, climate action will lose out.

A post-Brexit Government will be under huge pressure to sign off new trade deals quickly, which will be a great opportunity for any country to take advantage of our weakened position. A trade deal with America, for example, will most likely involve opening up our economy to fracking companies. Even if we tried to build environmental protections into such deals, the reality is that commercial interests will be dominant. The case of *Lone Pine Resources v. the Government of Canada* shows what awaits us when we enter into trade deals with more powerful nations. The Government of Quebec put a moratorium on fracking in 2011, but *Lone Pine Resources* has sued for over \$100 million of lost profits under the terms of the North American free trade agreement. Outside the EU, our power to protect ourselves against the interests of large global companies will be much diminished.

The European Union is an international heavyweight when it comes to striking trade deals, but it has not struck a trade deal with America precisely because it refuses to give up its own standards in areas such as environmental protections. Thanks to its power as the world's largest and most successful trading bloc, the EU has the economic clout to walk away from trade negotiations that are not in its interest. On our own, we will have nothing near the same clout. Even if we tried to protect our environment, our resolve would quickly collapse as the urgency to find new trading partners would force our hand.

No form of Brexit will halt that race to the bottom—not the Prime Minister's blind Brexit deal, which offers no legal guarantee against future deregulation, not a no-deal Brexit, and not even the softest-of-soft Norway-plus Brexit deals. Brexit is a fundamentally right-wing project. It seeks to deregulate our economy and hand the reins to powerful vested interests. It is political fantasy to think we can go ahead with Brexit and mitigate its worst effects. In the light of the right-wing Brexit agenda, the only option for all of us who are progressive is to oppose Brexit as a project. There is no point in tinkering with it.

Climate action has always been about social justice. In the 21st century, the battle to save our planet is inseparable from the battle to limit the power of big business and build a better world for all. I call on all progressive politicians in this House to see Brexit for the right-wing project it is. We can stop Brexit, and the democratic path to it is a people's vote with the option to stay in the European Union.

12.44 am

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak after the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse).

Too often in this place, when we talk about the implications of Brexit for business, we speak about multinationals—our car manufacturers, our pharmaceutical

companies and our banks—but perhaps not often enough do we talk about small and medium-sized enterprises. I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

The people behind SMEs are real people with real lives who have worked a lifetime to build a business, often risking everything they have to build something for themselves and their family. I violently agree with those who see a bright future outside the European Union. Despite being a remainer, that is what I believe, too, in the longer term. In the short term, as we have been trading in a certain way for 46 years, it is unfair and irresponsible to trample businesses underfoot in a headlong rush towards the exit door. We simply cannot look at these businesses and these businesspeople as collateral damage. When we talk about ideological concepts, the more important concept to a businessperson is finding the money to pay the bank loan, to pay the suppliers and to pay the wages.

This is not about "Project Fear." I think a no-deal Brexit has real risks, particularly for those sectors that have time-dependent supply chains. Cash flow is the key element for any business. Businesses do not have weeks and months of cash flow sitting in the bank, waiting for a rainy day. For a business with a time-dependent supply chain, such as a business exporting shellfish to France, a consignment delayed by 12 hours loses 50% of its value, and a consignment delayed by 24 hours loses 100% of its value. If a business loses one or two of those consignments, it may well be out of business.

Of course some would say that there will be no delays at ports, but that is not consistent with the facts of a no deal. Michel Barnier has been very clear that, in a no-deal situation, there will be 100% checks on animal produce and livestock at the border. Even "Fact—NOT Friction" accepts that the EU may impose checks.

For Northern Ireland, in particular, this is a huge risk. A simple cottage pie ends up on a shop shelf in Northern Ireland having passed over the border in different forms—from livestock to end product—seven times. Each time it would have to go through a border inspection post. It is one of a number of cattle conundra that would have to be solved in a no-deal world.

A no deal could have significant and perhaps irreversible consequences for Northern Ireland and for the integrity of the United Kingdom, which is why I support the Prime Minister's deal. The deal is a stepping-stone to the future. Yes, there are risks, but clearly we have negotiation advantages, too. For an SME, hope is not a strategy. We should support this deal, and I urge all hon. Members to do so.

12.48 am

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): It is a great honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), and I agree with absolutely everything he said.

Before Christmas I spoke in the debate on this motion and in the debate on no deal, and I outlined my position in favour of the agreement, so I will concentrate on two aspects relating to today's subject: exports and the finance of our business more generally.

The Secretary of State outlined clearly the success of British exporting over the past few years, with exports up by 38.1% since 2010, to £630 billion in the year to November 2018. This is happening when we are within

[Jeremy Lefroy]

the EU; I do not see that the EU has shackled us in our export performance in the past few years. I fully accept that there are areas where we could do still better, but we need to build on what has been achieved under the coalition Government and the most recent Conservative-led Governments, because it has clearly been successful. We need more emphasis on supporting SMEs into exports and on promoting our trade links and our trade network. I declare an interest, as one of the Prime Minister's trade envoys. We need to see a greater emphasis on the already increased amount of UK export finance, and we need to see that going to the smallest possible businesses. I ask the Chancellor and the Secretary of State to ensure that as we leave the EU we redouble our efforts on exports. Of course our businesses, particularly SMEs, will face challenges as we move into the new situation under the Prime Minister's deal, but with that support they can do very well.

The second point I wish to make is about the financing of our businesses more generally. We often hear of the great amount of inward investment we have in the UK, and that is to be welcomed, but one reason why we have so much inward investment is that we do not invest in our own businesses. The City of London is not as good as it could be in providing capital to British-based businesses so we do not see the kind of businesses that we see in Germany with the Mittelstand or in Italy with its equivalent—I do not know its name—where family businesses have turnovers of billions of pounds, euros, dollars, because they get the finance from their capital markets. We have pretty much the biggest capital markets in the world, but, with a lot of noble exceptions, they do not support British-owned businesses as much as they could. So as we leave the EU, I want to see this from our capital markets and the British Business Bank. It has been excellent in the work it has done but it could do five times more than it does, perhaps along the lines of the German Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau and other development banks. I want to see British institutions support British-owned businesses.

Along with that, we have to be absolutely sure that we invest in innovation and research, which is where the role of our universities is so vital. I declare an interest, as a trustee of one of our universities. It is vital that universities are supported in whatever way possible. If they are going to lose some research funding, that needs to be replaced—and more.

12.52 am

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Our duty in debating the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 this evening is not to focus on what we do not want, but to work out what we will support, in order to ensure that we respect the result of the referendum to leave the EU, but in a way that does not inadvertently cause damage and that can identify and realise future opportunities. The Act is the end of the beginning—what the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster called the “unavoidable gateway”, whether to a Canadian, Norwegian, Chequers or any other destination. It resolves crucial human issues of citizen rights, obligations and Northern Ireland, on which I have co-authored an amendment with my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire). The Act can also lead to stronger legislation on issues precious to many of us, including

colleagues such as the hon. Members for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) and for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn): human rights; gender equality; workers' rights; and environmental standards, where pledges have already been made. It means that this House will be able to decide whether we stick with EU manufacturing standards, go further or deviate, understanding the potential impact on frictionless trade. In the future, it will be we who decide whether to take more REACH—the registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals—legislation or further insurance sector rules. We will decide on immigration; as the Home Secretary said, there will be no limits on skilled labourers and there will be seasonal arrangements for agricultural workers. Those are the opportunities that this deal gives us, alongside a transition that provides for certainty before future change. It will not be easy—we have surely learned that already—but there can be advantages for these stubborn, independent-minded islands that are used to maintaining the balance of power in Europe against centralist tendencies.

Some of my colleagues prefer a no-deal solution. They believe that there is a way, as an invitation this evening put it, to open up the political space to take a different approach, but the nation's employers simply do not agree. I have spoken to manufacturers big and small, to retail and services companies, to the university in my constituency and to many other traders and investors as the longest-serving of the Prime Minister's trade envoys in the House of Commons, working with one of the fastest growing regions in south-east Asia, and not one has told me that no deal is the best way forward. Instead, they tell me that fear of uncertainty is holding back investment, jobs and apprenticeships and beginning to lose them contracts. Are they all scaremongering—the FSB, Business West, the NFU, Gibraltar, the Falklands, or even a family-owned Gloucester SME, which told me on Friday that

“customers and jobs will go elsewhere, and we are 14 weeks away from the most damaging impact on our economy for at least a generation”?

They, plus the supply chains of the aerospace, automotive and cyber sectors, cannot all be wrong. I do not believe that, faced with this evidence, any Government could take the risk of no deal, or that this Parliament would ever vote for no deal.

If we are to succeed in legislating for the withdrawal agreement—a genuine Brexit—Conservative and DUP Members, and others on the Opposition Benches who, like the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), realise that there is no magical, better Labour Brexit to be negotiated, will all have to pull together and support this pragmatic compromise. If we cannot do that, as the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) said, some cross-party grouping will come together for a solution to gain a majority, but in all likelihood that will be a deal less attractive to those who voted leave and to those who compare it with staying in the EU, and that could lead to an even more divisive second referendum. To paraphrase Churchill on the USA, I hope that this Parliament will do the right thing after exhausting all other options over the next few days and support and pass the withdrawal agreement.

12.57 am

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): I am delighted to be the last Back Bencher standing to conclude the debate before the Front Benchers have their say.

I thought the referendum result was a great tribute to the British people. It was a vote for opportunity, it was a vote of aspiration, and it was a vote for freedom. Many in this Chamber would absolutely support that. My real frustration is that this withdrawal agreement does not deliver on that opportunity. It does not deliver on returning sovereignty to the British people. We will not gain sovereignty over our laws, over our borders or, indeed, over our sea. Most importantly, we will not have the freedom to trade with countries around the world, outside Europe, where the opportunity most certainly lies.

So, what to do? To support this deal is clearly not the way forward, but we must preserve that opportunity and aspiration. Should we extend article 50? No. Is a few more months or even a year going to change two years of inactivity? I do not think so. We already have the deal that everybody is searching for: the World Trade Organisation deal. That is the deal that is well formed and well prepared for. It is not the dropping out or going over a cliff edge that people talk about; it is something that will deliver the opportunity. It is what the Government, without telling anybody, have actually been working on for more than a year, as has Europe, including France. Calais is ready and Dover is ready. There are many things that we could do to make it perfect, but it is the safe option and it will deliver what British business has been crying out for: certainty.

When we have WTO rules, we know what we get. What it says on the tin is what is inside it. That is what we absolutely need. Of course, we also get the benefit of not paying £39 billion, because at the end of the day that was in effect in large part payment for that two-year extension, during which we were going to endeavour to work our way towards a final deal that was not actually Brexit. We will stay as a United Kingdom, too, which is absolutely key for me.

People say, "How will you manage to take forward that opportunity?" If Australia can negotiate three trade deals in 13 months, I think that we are certainly up for a jolly good future. We should not believe those scare stories. I have sat on the Public Accounts Committee and scrutinised what the Government Departments are doing. Those planes will fly; those trains will cross the channel; those lorries will be able to get their goods from A to B; the IT infrastructure is largely there; the food is in place; and the drugs are in place, so let us not be put off by these scaremongering stories. Better still, let us consider article 24 of the General Agreement Trade on Tariffs and Trade. Let us consider remaining with zero-rate tariffs until such time as a final deal can be agreed. What I am not saying is that WTO is necessarily the end place, but it puts us in a much better bargaining position from which to move forward to look potentially at Canada plus, plus. We will already be out and in a much better position to achieve a proper deal with Europe. At the same time, we will not have lost the opportunity of striking trade deals with the rest of the world.

For those who say that we risk no Brexit at all, I have to say that, sorry, that simply does not equate. The Executive will still control the legislature. It is not Parliament's job. At the end of the day, when we look at the detail with regard to money resolutions, Third Readings, and, finally, at the possibility of prorogation, the Executive has control. Members should not be put off; we will deliver Brexit as a Government.

1.1 am

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I congratulate all the contributors to today's many faceted debate. It has been a healthy and straightforward debate where people have been honest with one another and straightforward, and I welcome that.

Mr Speaker, I also congratulate you on your typical display of dedication to the democratic process of this House. You have sat through every hour of every day of this debate, and, as always, you have assiduously performed your duties and done so with fairness, good grace and good humour and I am grateful for that.

In many of the recent vox pops in the media, people have expressed some frustration with the way that Members of this House have been dealing with the response to an implementation of the referendum decision. I say mildly—very mildly at this hour of the morning—that it has not helped that some of the Executive have ascribed false motives to Members across the House with whom they disagree and have accused them of playing games. I do not believe that Members have been playing games; they have treated this matter with the seriousness that it deserves. The vast majority of hon. Members have lived up to the adjective in their title and have behaved honourably. In this debate, hon. Members are asserting the very role ascribed to them: to represent their constituents and to do so to the best of their ability; to exercise their judgment in the long-term interests of their constituents, yes, but, as we have seen from speaker after speaker today, in the long-term interests of this country as well.

For too long, Parliament has been taken for granted by successive Executives. What we are witnessing at the moment is not a coup, as was reported in one newspaper, but an overdue redressing of the balance between the Executive and Parliament and within our democratic system. It is a simple and not a very radical rebalancing and, as we have heard in this debate, the overwhelming majority of Members are seeking not to ignore the referendum result, but to make sure that we do not have imposed on us a Brexit that undermines our economy, costs people their jobs and threatens their livelihoods. Members here are seeking to do their best by their constituents and by the country. They have done that tonight with candour and, in many instances, with some courage.

Let me just turn to some of the many excellent contributions in this debate—there were so many that I will not be able to refer to them all. There are Members on the Government Benches who, with straightforward honesty and, yes, with some courage, expressed their views in opposition to their own party's position.

The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) expressly set out his views and concerns about the impact that this deal would have on his constituents, and his view that there is a need to go back and get another deal. The hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson), on behalf of the DUP, honestly expressed the concerns of his party with regard to the backstop. He said clearly that nothing has changed in recent weeks from the promises that there might be some legal assurances that could be provided. I have some disagreement with the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson); I do not believe that this is some plot by the deep state.

[John McDonnell]

We have heard from Government Members who have resigned their positions to stand firm on their principles, including the hon. Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman). We have heard from the hon. Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns), who explained very honestly that, in his view, this is a fundamentally flawed deal. The hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) extremely eloquently demonstrated that, in his view, the political declaration in particular is a vacuous statement. The hon. Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) expressed his grave concerns, saying that this could be a gamble that could cost growth and jobs.

We heard from the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen), who is in his place, as well as the hon. Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti) and the right hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands), who gave us the expertise that he has garnered over the years, particularly with regard to European relations. We heard from the hon. Members for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills), for Witney (Robert Courts) and for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris), all of whom expressed their honest views that this deal will not provide the certainty that they or their constituents want.

A number of my hon. Friends, with some emotion, expressed their understanding of the motivation for a number of their constituents who voted leave. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden). This is the first time I have heard Tacitus quoted in this House; that was a breakthrough in itself. In fact, he quoted not only Tacitus, but Oliver Cromwell and Joan of Arc. In addition, my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) expressed very clearly how his community felt left behind in the overall processes of investment. Similarly, my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) spoke about the divided society. My hon. Friends the Members for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley), for Preston (Sir Mark Hendrick), for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) and for Stroud (Dr Drew) all explained the impact of austerity on their constituents that had motivated people in those constituencies to vote leave.

Other Members expressed their concerns about the need for more assurances, including my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), who made a clear point about the need for assurances over human rights provisions. My hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) mentioned that the levels of deprivation in her constituency may well have motivated her constituents to vote leave. My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) explained to us all what our responsibilities are now—to come together, take this matter seriously and seek, as best we can, a way forward so that we can take as many people with us as possible.

We heard from others about the social consequences. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), who set out the economic consequences. The hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson) was extremely clear about the impact that this deal would have on the financial services of this country, and said that we need further assurances on protections. The same is true of my hon. Friend the Member for

Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) and the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), all of whom explained in detail the social, cultural and economic consequences that this deal would have in their particular areas.

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), and my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) spoke about the impact on her community, particularly on the university. There were others, including my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), the hon. Members for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), and my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), who went beyond the economic consequences to discuss the social and cultural consequences in his multicultural constituency.

I thank those Members who have brought their ideas forward including those who have supported the “Common Market 2.0” proposals such as my hon. Friends the Members for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) and for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra). But I also thank those Members who, yes, have been very honest and straightforward about their view that there should be another public vote, including my hon. Friends the Members for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), for Huddersfield, for Hove and for Feltham and Heston, who all expressed our own frustration—what has been happening over the last two years in these negotiations that has brought us to this situation?

This debate has been an exemplary demonstration of this legislature performing its constitutional role. It has confirmed for me, and I believe for many other Members, the belief that the deal we will vote on tomorrow is not supported by a majority in this House, and possibly—

Dr Fox: What is Labour’s plan?

John McDonnell: I will come on to that—[*Interruption.*] I will come on to that, if the right hon. Gentleman will allow me to finish. We have maintained a level of respect in this debate so far—let us try and keep it like that.

I believe that this deal will not go through tomorrow—it will not have the support. But I think we have increasingly found tonight that we recognise that our first responsibility is to avoid the catastrophe of a no-deal Brexit. The House spoke clearly on this only recently when voting on the amendment to the Finance Bill tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). Let me remind the House of some of the assessments that motivated that vote at that stage. We have had some reference to them tonight—it is about the impact of no deal. The Government’s own economic analysis put the potential cost of a no-deal Brexit at nearly 10% of GDP. The Bank of England said that it could cause more economic damage than the financial crisis of 10 years ago, including unemployment of 6% and a 14% hit to house prices. The CBI has warned—

Andrew Bridgen: The shadow Chancellor says that the prediction is that a no-deal Brexit could cost the UK economy 10% of GDP. Would he bear in mind that total trade—import and export—with the European Union comes to only 9.5% of our economy altogether?

John McDonnell: The consequence predicted by the Bank of England is about the long-term impact over time. Yes, we can treat some of these assessments with scepticism, but it is not just the Bank of England—it is the Treasury itself, the CBI and other representative organisations, and the National Institute of Economic and Social Research as well. The concerns they have expressed have been flooding in. The CBI has warned of a “lost decade”. We can be in no doubt about the likely consequences of a no-deal Brexit, and we cannot say that we were not warned. I believe that this House will act accordingly and reject a no-deal Brexit.

The Prime Minister repeatedly warned that no deal is better than a bad deal. She may now be regretting saying that as she tries to persuade Members of this House, including those on her own Benches, to vote for a bad deal. Because let us be clear on one thing, and it seems that the House is very likely to be clear on it tomorrow: this deal is a bad deal. The cross-party Exiting the European Union Committee—

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Perhaps the shadow Chancellor would like to tell us exactly what his deal would be.

John McDonnell: I will come on to that.

We believe that this is a bad deal because of the advice we have been getting. Some of that advice came from the cross-party Exiting the European Union Committee, which unanimously warned that the deal

“fails to offer sufficient clarity or certainty about the future.”

I quoted Mervyn King in the debate a month ago. Let me remind Members of what Mervyn King, a former Governor of the Bank of England, said. He described the withdrawal agreement as incompetence of the highest order.

The result of that incompetence is that jobs are being lost and livelihoods are already being threatened. As has been mentioned, Jaguar Land Rover, citing factors including uncertainty around Brexit, has announced 4,500 job cuts. Ford is planning to cut 1,000 jobs in Bridgend. Honda will stop production at its Swindon plant for six days in April. Government Ministers are fully aware of the consequences of their actions. We recently debated the Government’s own analysis of something approximating to the Prime Minister’s proposals. The Government themselves admitted, as has been mentioned, that the economy would be 3.9% smaller as a result of us agreeing to this deal. To put that in context, that is a cost of over £80 billion. In the long term, the damage is even greater. The Government analysis also estimated that the impact of trade barriers alone could mean an average drop in wages of 3%—£800 a year in today’s terms.

I believe that this House will not vote for a deal that damages so badly the living standards of our constituents. We must also be aware of the political damage that would be caused by forcing through an agreement that clearly does not have the support of the people of this country and that contains a backstop which, in the words of the Attorney General,

“would endure indefinitely until a superseding agreement took its place, in whole or in part, as set out therein. Further, the Withdrawal Agreement cannot provide a legal means of compelling the EU to conclude such an agreement.”

None of that has been changed by what the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) described earlier today as “meaningless letters”.

Let me be clear what Labour is proposing. Our negotiating priorities would differ from this Government’s. We would prioritise a permanent and comprehensive customs union with a say in future trade deals. We would deliver a strong, collaborative relationship with the single market, and we would guarantee that the UK does not fall behind the EU in rights for workers, consumers and the environment. Tomorrow it will be clear that the Government’s deal does not have the confidence of the House, and that a new approach is needed.

Neil O’Brien: The former head of the European Council’s legal service, responding to the shadow International Trade Secretary’s call for a customs union in which the UK would have a say, has said:

“Obviously this is ruled out. It is contrary to the basic EU principle of autonomy of decision making. Don’t even think about it!”

Does the right hon. Gentleman think he knows better?

John McDonnell: The hon. Gentleman clearly has not been listening. My hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) explained how we would, as a third country, be able to negotiate a deal that would give us that say. [*Interruption.*] If Government Members doubt that, they should give us the opportunity to start the negotiations.

Tomorrow this deal will go down, and it is now time to put the mistakes of the past two years behind us and clear away the debris of this deal and the Government’s failed negotiations. It is clear that, to break the deadlock and deliver a clear mandate for a new approach, we need a general election. It is time to let the people have their say.

If that is not achievable, this House will need to work together to secure the best compromise to protect our country, and the Executive need to recognise that Parliament must rule on this matter, not the Executive. At that stage, Members may want to confirm that new deal with the people in a public vote. People will be looking to us to judge whether we have the maturity, good sense and commitment to our country and the national interest to secure a deal that protects jobs and the economy. I believe we can live up to that, and we must.

1.17 am

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): This has been a wide-ranging and interesting debate that has exposed clearly the different and passionately held views on all sides of the wider argument about Brexit. In my contribution to this debate on 6 December, I set out the economic case for a deal, the damage that would be likely to result from disruption of cross-border supply chains in a no-deal scenario, and how a deal would deliver a dividend for the UK economy in terms of both economic growth and the public finances. Those arguments remain valid, and you will be relieved to hear, Mr Speaker, that I do not intend to repeat or elaborate on them.

We have heard arguments in favour of the full range of options for both exit mechanics and the future relationship between the UK and the EU. Indeed, I think I heard pretty much the full range within the speech of

[Mr Philip Hammond]

the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner). At one moment, I thought he might be on the brink of applying for associate membership of the European Research Group.

A large group of my hon. Friends recognised in their contributions the logic of the Prime Minister's deal and the need for a compromise so that we can move on as a country. My hon. Friends the Members for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), for Harborough (Neil O'Brien), for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), for Waveney (Peter Aldous), for Gloucester (Richard Graham), for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami), for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke), for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham), for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) and for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris), and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald), all made that point. I think my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands) was in that category as well.

My hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk probably summed it up best when he said that he himself would like "a 100% Brexit" but recognised that only 52% voted for it, so that to unite the country we all have to compromise. This is a time for individual sacrifice in the greater good.

Two of my hon. Friends were a little more blunt in their contributions: my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) recognised explicitly that their motive for voting for the Prime Minister's deal was a fear that the alternative might be no Brexit at all.

Peter Kyle: The Chancellor is praising other people for compromise, but if the deal is defeated tomorrow, will he stick to that principle and will he compromise further with other people who are expressing other views, particularly those of us who think that the public should be brought back into this discussion?

Mr Hammond: The deal that the Prime Minister has presented to Parliament very clearly is a compromise between the views of people on both sides of this argument. It will not deliver 100% of what anybody wants, and the Prime Minister herself has recognised that only this afternoon.

I want to mention my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), because I think he summed up what is still a dilemma for many—that the middle is being squeezed from both sides—and I wish him well in his consideration of these important issues over the next 24 hours.

Opposition Members made many points. A group of them—the hon. Members for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) I think, for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden), for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) and for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones)—while clearly rejecting the Prime Minister's deal, which I acknowledge, were all I think signalling that they would wish to be able to support a deal and to find a way forward, explicitly recognising that no one is going to get everything that they want.

I listened carefully to the contributions and the concerns that were expressed, and I believe that the architecture of the Prime Minister's deal is capable of accommodating such concerns if that is what we as a nation want to do. It is in that spirit that the Government have accepted the amendment proposed by the hon. Members for Bassetlaw (John Mann) and for Don Valley (Caroline Flint). However, we must distinguish between adjustments to the negotiated future relationship and seeking to renegotiate the withdrawal agreement—something that is simply not deliverable. I shall return to that theme later.

A number of hon. Members on the Opposition Benches—the hon. Members for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley), for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) and for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman)—simply wished to turn back the clock and pretend that this whole thing had never happened. I urge hon. Members expressing that view to consider carefully the wider consequences for our political system if that were to happen. I would say to Scottish colleagues who expressed that view that their arguments would be more powerful if they could show an ability to consider the consequences for the UK as a whole, as well as the consequences for Scotland.

I thought the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) made a crucially important point, which is that the House needs to find a way to show what it is for, not just what it is against. She went on to make, I think, the sole pitch of the evening for the Norway model.

Joseph Johnson: Has the Chancellor by any chance read the powerful letter in today's *Financial Times* from the former EU Financial Services Commissioner, Jonathan Hill? He said that he had yet to meet anybody who felt that the Norway model would work for the UK's financial services industry. In fact, he felt that EEA members had so little influence on the EU's rule making for financial services that they were grateful if anybody even replied to any of their correspondence.

Mr Hammond: I have been making effectively the same point myself for about the last year. We concluded that the EEA model would not work for Britain's most important sector, financial services. The deal that the Prime Minister has negotiated has within it good and strong provisions for financial services and will be a much better result for the financial services industry than the EEA model would be.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op)
rose—

Mr Hammond: I will give way briefly to the hon. Gentleman and then I must make some progress.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Will the Chancellor explain to us, then, how this deal gives our country more say in how Europe defines its financial services, which we will want to continue to trade with, compared with what we currently have as members?

Mr Hammond: Without wishing to digress too far, the simple point is this. Under an EEA model, the whole of the UK financial services sector and all its sub-sectors would be subject to European Union regulation in perpetuity, without any ability to opt out. Under the

model that we have agreed with the European Union under this deal, we will be able to seek equivalence where it is right for us to do so and not to seek equivalence where it is clearly not in our interest to do so, for example in the insurance sector.

A group of my hon. Friends—my hon. Friends the Members for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen), for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns), for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) and for Fareham (Suella Braverman)—made the case for what I will call an ideological Brexit: leaving with no deal and without any fear of the consequences. I profoundly disagree with them, but I respect their arguments. They are sincerely made and genuinely held.

A further group of my hon. and right hon. Friends—my right hon. Friends the Members for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) and for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) and my hon. Friends the Members for York Outer (Julian Sturdy), for South Dorset (Richard Drax) and for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills)—made the case for getting a better deal and, implicitly, if that was not achievable, leaving without a deal. I have to say that getting a better deal is not a realistic outcome at this stage in the process. I will return to that theme in just a moment.

Finally, the argument was made by my hon. Friends the Members for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), for Bracknell (Dr Lee) and for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) and by the hon. Members for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), for Stroud (Dr Drew) and for Westminster North (Ms Buck) for a second referendum. Most of those Members were clear that, in arguing for a second referendum, what they are hoping to achieve is a reversal of the Brexit decision.

With just 73 days left before we leave the European Union, we have to recognise the basic architecture of the process we are engaged in, the constraints within which we are operating and the nature of the decision we are faced with. We in this Parliament have essentially three routes open to us over the next few weeks: a negotiated deal where both the divorce arrangements and the future relationship, as well as how we manage the process in an orderly way, are agreed with the EU, with an implementation period guaranteeing a smooth transition; an exit with no deal and no transition, where key elements of the divorce such as the financial settlement will ultimately be determined by the courts, where protections for citizens will be unilateral, with an abrupt end to single market access and other privileges of membership for both businesses and citizens, and where there will be no agreed framework for managing the process of resolving disputes, with all the attendant risks of disruption that that will bring; or the third option, a revocation of the article 50 notice and no Brexit at all.

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to the Chancellor for giving way. Throughout this process he has been far and away the coolest head around the Cabinet table, constantly advocating for the economic interests of the deal over some of the hotheads, many of whom left the Government. So why on earth, at this late stage, is he still countenancing the prospect of no deal? How can he justify spending billions of pounds on preparing for a no deal that he does not want, that the Prime Minister does not want, that this House does not want, that the country does

not want and that businesses do not want? It is fuelling uncertainty, it is adding to anxiety and it is costing the taxpayer. It is reckless and irresponsible. Why on earth is a serious person such as the Chancellor still persisting with this absolute fantasy? It is a disgrace. Rule it out!

Mr Hammond: Mr Speaker, we are engaged in a debate here and, whether the hon. Member likes it or not, a number of my colleagues have advocated the merit of a no-deal exit. I have made it very clear that I do not agree with them, but I respect their position because it is a sincerely held position, consistently expressed. While I do not agree with them, I will vigorously defend their right to express their point of view.

Those are the three possible outcomes from where we are now.

Stella Creasy: Will the Chancellor give way?

Mr Hammond: I will not give way; I need to make some progress.

It is clear to me that the majority of this House is opposed to no deal, for very good reason in my view. When the British people voted narrowly to leave the EU, they did so at the end of a campaign that had emphatically promised them a better life outside the EU. Like the vast majority of us in this House, I won my seat at the general election on a manifesto pledge to deliver on that referendum decision. So although I did not make those promises, I feel bound to ensure that we not only deliver Brexit but do so in a way that makes good on the promise of greater prosperity. A no-deal Brexit would not do that and would therefore, in my view, be seen as every bit as much a betrayal as no Brexit at all.

Stella Creasy: I thank the Chancellor for giving way. He has just said that it is right for this country to do Brexit in a way that would bring prosperity. Will he say which of the Brexit scenarios, which his Department has done the figures for, show this country being better off?

Mr Hammond: It is very clear, and I have had the discussion in the Chamber many times, that the closer our relationship with the European Union, the closer the trading partnership we are able to maintain and the less friction there is in our trading relationships, the greater our prosperity and our economic growth will be. A no-deal Brexit would not do that.

I believe we have an obligation to deliver Brexit, and to do it through a negotiated deal that protects Britain's jobs and Britain's businesses. At the other extreme, a revocation of article 50 would indeed be seen as a betrayal. It would reinforce disillusion with the political system and it would seriously risk fuelling populism at a time when we in this country can least afford it.

David T. C. Davies: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that all the statistics, which are being thrown around somewhat inaccurately by some in this Chamber, show that under every and any scenario Britain will be better off? It is simply a case of how much better off—that is what we are arguing about.

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is of course right. A number of hon. Members have appeared to suggest in their remarks that we might be absolutely worse off in

[Mr Philip Hammond]

certain circumstances. The analysis the Government have published shows that that is clearly not the case. The country will be better off. The economy will grow in every modelled outcome. The question is merely by how much.

I believe the great majority of right hon. and hon. Members have either come or will come to the same conclusion as me: that the only Brexit that will protect our economy for the long run while honouring the referendum decision is a negotiated, orderly agreed Brexit, with an implementation period to allow a smooth process from our membership of the EU to a future close partnership with the EU that protects the vital trade, economic security and cultural links between the UK and our neighbours—in short, a deal.

Lucy Powell: I thank the Chancellor for his generous comments earlier about my contribution. To be clear—I say this to offer an olive branch to the Government—the EEA, Norway-plus, common market 2.0 option would involve us voting for the withdrawal agreement, but with a different political declaration that would more closely align us with the single market and the customs union. He might want to think about that before dismissing it.

Mr Hammond: The hon. Lady acknowledges something that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster said in his contribution a couple of days ago. It is important for us to remember that any form of negotiated solution requires a withdrawal agreement, and that has to include provisions around the financial settlement, citizens' rights and the Irish border. The EU has made it clear that it is not prepared to renegotiate the withdrawal agreement that has already been negotiated.

I am not suggesting that all those who recognise the need for a deal support the Prime Minister's deal. I know that that is not true, but I want to make the case that this deal can provide a way forward for all those who support a deal. I want to explain why those who call for a deal, but not this deal, as a number of Members from all parts of the House have done—people who dream of a negotiated arrangement without the Irish backstop or of single market access without the entry fee and without free movement of people—are simply dreaming, because the deal that is on the table represents the high water mark. A withdrawal agreement is a necessary precondition to any negotiated deal with the EU and to any form of transition or implementation period. Without a withdrawal agreement, the EU will not negotiate any form of future relationship.

On citizens and money, we have reached good outcomes in the withdrawal agreement. On the Irish protocol, clearly none of us is comfortable with the temporary backstop arrangement, which is why all of us—the UK Government, the Irish Government and the EU—will be seeking to avoid its use under any circumstances and have committed to using our best endeavours to ensure that it will never be used and that in the unlikely event that it is, it is replaced by new arrangements as rapidly as possible. It is not a trivial point that the backstop fundamentally challenges the EU's core principles.

We should be in no doubt, either, that the EU means what it says about the withdrawal agreement not being open for renegotiation. If we want a negotiated future

relationship of any kind—I say this to the hon. Member for Manchester Central—it will be based on the withdrawal agreement that is before the House tonight.

Sir John Hayes: We have heard once again that the backstop is undesirable and no one wants it. We have heard that it is temporary and an insurance policy. Every insurance policy is time-limited. If neither side wants it and everyone acknowledges that it is temporary, why can we not put a date on it and end it at a particular time? Surely that is not unreasonable.

Mr Hammond: I do not know how much engagement my right hon. Friend has with the insurance industry, but it would baulk at the notion that an insurance policy is time-limited. If someone is covered by an insurance policy against the acquisition of some terrible disease, such as asbestosis, it may be 10 or 20 years later that they discover they are a sufferer. They would expect the insurance put in place to cover them. The European Union and the Irish Government are very clear that the withdrawal agreement is negotiated on the basis that the backstop provides an absolute reassurance that in every circumstance, the Irish border will remain open.

The Prime Minister said earlier this evening that her deal is a compromise, and she was clear in her Lancaster House speech at the outset of the process that achieving an agreement would require compromise. The political declaration that has been achieved has exceeded our expectations in the commitments that the EU has made: an agreement to construct the closest economic relationship between the EU and any advanced economy in the world; a free trade area for goods with no tariffs, no fees, no charges and no quantitative restrictions; a commitment to an ambitious relationship on services and investment, including financial services, building on the most ambitious achievements of EU trade deals; and agreement to further co-operation across a wide range of sectors, from transport to energy and data. It provides a strong basis on which to negotiate the legal text of our future partnership agreement, and the Prime Minister has made it clear that we expect Parliament to play a prominent role as we shape the political declaration into a legally binding text.

Alison Thewliss: Despite what the Chancellor has just set out, the reality is that nothing he has described tonight will be as good as the situation we have now as an EU member state.

Mr Hammond: It is a balance, and I have personally come to the conclusion that the damage that would be done to our political system, the resulting instability and the economic consequences mean that the economic cost of going back would outweigh the economic cost of going forward. I am sorry if the hon. Lady does not agree, but I can assure her that I have thought very long and hard about this.

Those who believe, as his tests suggest the Leader of the Opposition does, that it is possible to have the exact same benefits of being in the EU while being out of it—[*Interruption.*] I know that the shadow International Trade Secretary agrees with me, because he wrote so in *The Guardian* this morning. Those people are simply wrong. I recognise that there are people on the Conservative Benches who have a principled objection to the Prime Minister's deal. I respectfully disagree with them, but I recognise that their motives are honourable.

I wish that I could be as charitable about the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Chancellor. They say they reject the Prime Minister's deal because they want a strong and collaborative future relationship, but the Prime Minister's deal delivers that. They say they want fair management of migration in the interests of the economy and communities, but the Prime Minister's deal delivers that too. They insist on measures to defend rights and protections and to protect national security and on the capacity to tackle cross-border crime and to deliver for all regions and nations of the UK, but the Prime Minister's deal does all those things already. The only one of the Labour leader's tests that the Prime Minister's deal does not meet is the demand that Britain should receive, as a non-member, the exact same benefits of membership—*[Interruption.]* I did not say the same thing. Even the Leader of the Opposition must be able to work out that such a demand could never be delivered, and of course that is why he made it. I say to him that it is time to put the national interest first, to stop chasing unicorns and to start engaging in the real debate.

The deal before the House honours our pledge to implement Brexit, delivering control of our borders, laws and money, while also fulfilling our vision for a future partnership with the EU that will support Britain's prosperity and security in the years ahead. In short, it delivers the Brexit promised in the referendum. That makes it a remarkable achievement—a compromise that everyone in the UK can get behind, however they voted in the referendum. The ability to compromise and find a way through is, after all, one of our great strengths as a nation—it is what gives our society its resilience. It is a characteristic that has been less in evidence in the Brexit debate over the last couple of years, but one that we need to rediscover as a matter of urgency.

No one is going to get exactly the Brexit they want, but in this deal we have a way forward that everyone can live with. Time is not on our side. We as a House now need to move swiftly and decisively to get behind the deal, to make the tough choices needed to simultaneously deliver the Brexit people voted for, protect our economy and our national security and give people the brighter future they were promised. Neither no deal nor no Brexit will allow us to come together as a nation and move on. Both would leave a sizeable proportion of the population feeling cheated and betrayed. The deal is the compromise that can bring the whole nation together, and I commend it to the House.

1.45 am

Ordered, That the debate be now adjourned.—*(Jo Churchill.)*

Debate to be resumed tomorrow (Order, 9 January).

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

CORPORATION TAX

That the draft Investment Allowance and Cluster Area Allowance (Relevant Income: Tariff Receipts) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 31 October, be approved.—*(Jo Churchill.)*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (AUDITORS)

That the draft Statutory Auditors and Third Country Auditors (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 6 November, be approved.—*(Jo Churchill.)*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (MERCHANT SHIPPING)

That the draft Ship and Port Security (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 21 November, be approved.—*(Jo Churchill.)*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (CIVIL AVIATION)

That the draft Air Passenger Rights and Air Travel Organisers' Licensing (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 28 November, be approved.—*(Jo Churchill.)*

Question agreed to.

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, I propose that we take motions 6 to 8 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES)

That the draft Alternative Investment Fund Managers (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 29 November, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES)

That the draft Venture Capital Funds (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 13 November 2018, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES)

That the draft Social Entrepreneurship Funds (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 13 November 2018, be approved.—*(Jo Churchill.)*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

IMMIGRATION

That the draft Immigration (Leave to Enter and Remain) (Amendment) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 3 December, be approved.—*(Jo Churchill.)*

Question agreed to.

COMMITTEE ON STANDARDS

Ordered,

That Douglas Chapman be discharged from the Committee on Standards and Stewart Malcolm McDonald be added.—*(Jo Churchill.)*

COMMITTEE OF PRIVILEGES

Ordered,

That Douglas Chapman be discharged from the Committee of Privileges and Stewart Malcolm McDonald be added.—*(Jo Churchill.)*

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Dr Lisa Cameron be discharged from the Health and Social Care Committee and Dr Philippa Whitford be added.—*(Bill Wiggan, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)*

PETITION

Green Deal Scheme

1.47 am

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I know that people have been waiting all day for this. The green deal is an extremely serious matter, and although the hour is late it is important that the voice of the people of Glasgow North is heard.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Glasgow North,

Declares that the Government-backed Green Deal Scheme has adversely affected residents of Glasgow North both financially and psychologically; further that many residents have, in good faith, invested their life savings or accrued several thousands of pounds of debt to pay for work that was carried out by companies approved by the Green Deal Scheme; further that in some cases the work, including the installation of insulation and of solar panels, was incomplete; further that some were sub-standard and in many cases residents were given incorrect information which led them to believe that they would save or make money when in fact they had simply lost money; and further that in other cases the installer did not apply for building warrants and as a result they are unable to sell their properties, or have the peace of mind that their homes are safe to live in, or that the insurance policies residents continue to pay are valid without a building warrant.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to compensate financially and protect people who have found themselves suffering in this way after signing up to this Government-backed scheme using Government-approved installers.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002303]

St Rollox Railway Works: Closure

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Craig Whittaker.)

1.49 am

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It might be the small hours, but I rise to speak on no small matter. It is a very important matter facing Glaswegians in the future: that of Scottish engineering. The St Rollox locomotive and carriage works in my constituency, which has existed since 1856, is now under imminent threat of closure and I rise in support of the workers there, 200 of whom face the loss of their livelihoods, which is of great concern to the city of Glasgow.

The works were built in 1856, for the Caledonian railway. The new works were built on the site of the first railway in Scotland, the Glasgow and Garnkirk railway. To this day, it is still affectionately known as the Caley. Given that it has existed since the dawn of the railway age, it is very sad that we could be witnessing the end of an industry that is synonymous with the community of Springburn in which it was built.

During the second world war, St Rollox joined in the war effort, producing, among other things, Airspeed Horsa gliders for the Normandy landing airborne assault. Cowlairs, nearby, also produced 200,000 bearing shells for Rolls-Royce Merlin engines. For more than 170 years that community has been at the forefront of Scotland's engineering excellence. Indeed, anyone growing up in the city of Glasgow will have visited, and will be familiar with, the city's transport museum, and will have seen all the wonderful steam locomotives that were built in Springburn, more than 25,000 of which were sent to all corners of the earth. That is a real pedigree of Scottish engineering, which endures to this day. It would be appalling if the last vestiges of such a wonderful tradition were to be lost, and we, along with the trade unions, believe that that is entirely avoidable.

St Rollox has endured through nationalisation and privatisation. In 1948, when it was nationalised as part of British Railways, it became the primary Scottish centre for the repair of rolling stock, and it retains that role to this day. After British Rail Engineering Ltd was privatised in 1988, the site was operated as a rail maintenance facility by British Rail Maintenance Ltd, along with Eastleigh, Doncaster and Wolverton. It was then a nationalised industry, but during that period its size was reduced from 150 acres to about 15 today. In 1995 BRML was privatised and the site was sold to Babcock International and Siemens, along with the Wolverton site. The sites have been paired ever since. In 2002, both sites were sold to Alstom, a French-owned company, and in 2007 Alstom sold the site to a company called Railcare.

Railcare was placed in administration in July 2013. Although I was not a Member of Parliament then, I remember the great anxiety that that caused. However, from anxiety came great hope when, in August 2013, the site was acquired by a German-based engineering group, Knorr-Bremse. In 2018, it was sold to another German company, an industrial turnaround specialist called Mutares. In November 2018, just a few weeks after its acquisition, it was formed into a newco known as Gemini Rail, which was a wholly owned subsidiary

company of Mutares but also associated with Knorr-Bremse—for instance, sharing the same company house number. It is clear this has been an exercise conveniently designed quickly to rationalise operations in the UK.

As at December 2018, St Rollox continues to carry out component and rolling stock repairs and overhauls. Recent work has included overhauls of class 156s, class 158s and class 320s for Abellio ScotRail. It is the largest rolling stock repair site in Scotland. Two smaller sites in Kilmarnock are operated by Brodie and Wabtec respectively, and are still operating at capacity.

In December last year, shortly after acquiring the site, the new owner announced very suddenly that it planned to close the works, stating that it was making losses of between £3 million and £4 million. Unite, which represents more than 90% of the workers on the site and which conducted an inquiry, believes that the actual losses amounted to only about £1 million to £1.5 million. After a meeting with the managing director of the site, it was conceded that the real losses made by the company that year were only £1 million to £1.5 million at St Rollox, but it was forecast that there would be larger losses in the future as the UK rolling-stock industry was transformed, with new stock coming on line, and there was less demand for repairs and maintenance of legacy rolling stock.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech on an issue about which I know he cares deeply. Does he agree that this is another example of far-removed managers making decisions that have an impact on workers who keep our industry alive, and that we need to reverse that and put the power back into the hands of those workers?

Mr Sweeney *rose*—

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I know how much fighting for good jobs in his constituency means to my hon. Friend, but I also know the history of St Rollox. My grandfather, Walter Freer, worked there in the 1920s, at the time of the Railways Act 1921. St Rollox was purpose-built for both locomotive and carriageway, and with wagon works. When I was a child, my grandad was Casey Jones, so I am proud to be here in his memory. That pride will also be shared by the community of Springburn. St Rollox railway is part of that community and has been since 1856, but now some want to close it down. There are similarities with my own community of Birkenshaw, Tannochside and Viewpark, where once the Caterpillar factory stood, the biggest European indoor factory at the time. It was 32 years today—

Mr Speaker: Order. An intervention should be very brief in the form of an observation or question. This is not a speech.

Hugh Gaffney: I am getting there.

Mr Speaker: No, I am sorry. If the hon. Gentleman has secured the agreement of the sponsoring Member and the Minister and the Chair, he can make a speech, but he has not secured that agreement. This is an intervention, and I think it is reaching its conclusion. [*Interruption.*] It is not a speech; sorry.

Hugh Gaffney: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Some 32 years ago the factory was taken over by the workers. They looked for a way out and I am going to offer the same thing to the workers in St Rollox.

Mr Sweeney: I thank both my hon. Friends for making those contributions, and my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) was typically passionate about this issue. I agree with the points both of them are making about workers' control and workers having their livelihoods and value misrepresented by remote management. One of the big problems the St Rollox site has faced over the recent period under private ownership has been the increasing branch-plant relationship developed between the Wolverton site in Milton Keynes and the Springburn plant in Glasgow. All the white-collar operations have been moved to Milton Keynes and the entire operation is controlled at, and its centre of gravity has increasingly moved towards, Milton Keynes. There is not the same vigorous entrepreneurial spirit that once existed, fighting to bring in contracts, to expand the site and to invest in the site. It has increasingly been allowed to wither on the vine, and work has deliberately been turned away from St Rollox and Springburn, allowing it to almost become a self-fulfilling prophecy that it is destined for closure. That is not fair on the workforce. If they are given proper control of the site and an opportunity to flourish, I have every confidence that they could grow in the future.

The St Rollox site has a turnover of £20.4 million this year. The management accept that is enough to allow the company to wash its own face at St Rollox. It is believed that closing the site will leave Scotland's railway at a huge strategic disadvantage in maintaining its own rolling stock, depending on railway maintenance facilities in other parts of the UK.

Unite the union, which is represented in the Gallery, and others are seeking a postponement of the serving of the statutory 45 days' notice to allow more time for a rescue plan to be developed. It is understood that there is a series of contracts that could be bid for which would more than ensure the short to medium-term future of the works, although the company maintains that it would do little to address the fundamental issue of overhead costs to operate the site.

It has come to light that the compulsory consultation notice is likely to be served on the workforce this month. Apparently, this is due to the cost of overheads that Gemini, the new owners, is experiencing in running such a large and underutilised site. However, a solution is in the offing: transfer of the overall site operation and custody to ScotRail and/or Network Rail could see Gemini retain its operations as a tenant or ScotRail operate it entirely in-house as a standalone operation.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I thank my constituency neighbour for giving way. Does the hon. Gentleman welcome the fact that the Scottish Transport Minister has also called for a delay to the statutory consultation, which he did after our counterpart in the Scottish Parliament, Bob Doris, raised this at First Minister's questions? Does the hon. Gentleman welcome the efforts of the Scottish Government to bring all the stakeholders around the table to find a way forward for the site?

Mr Sweeney: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He raises the actions already taken so far; there has been a very rapid response from elected Members of all parties to address this critical issue facing such a strategic and iconic industrial facility in Glasgow.

I will come to the details of that action soon, but first I want to outline the extent of the work that could have been brought into the site but that curiously the current management has not been entrepreneurial enough to bid for, never mind secure. That includes class 320 work for ScotRail and its fleet owners Eversholt, which is potentially worth £6.5 million; class 156 work for Northern Rail, worth £3 million; class 156 work for ScotRail, worth £2 million; class 156 retrofitting for ScotRail, worth another £1.5 million; and class 153 ScotRail work, worth another £3 million. There is also exam and inspection work unable to be done at other ScotRail depots or in Scotland because they are at capacity and do not have the workforce. In addition, there is high-speed train conversion work also available and class 170 work worth another £3.5 million, as well as the Caledonian Sleeper work. There is a huge array of potential opportunities and investment to be brought into the site that it has not even considered bidding for. It is bizarre that the company would not be doing that if it is not a branch-plant economy and relationship.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman's speech has been very passionate and I agree with a lot of what he has said. Does he agree that another danger is that the 45-day redundancy notice does not give enough time for a solution to be found for the company and the highly skilled workforce at St Rollox?

Mr Sweeney: I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman, who makes a pertinent point about the triggering of the HR1 statutory notice, which starts the clock ticking. In my previous job at BAE Systems, I remember when that clock was set ticking at a mass meeting in 2012. At that time, more than 1,000 jobs were put at risk on the Clyde, and I know how unpleasant that feeling was, especially just before Christmas. The workforce were really sold short by the management. In the morning they were given their Christmas hampers, and in the afternoon they were told that their works were closing down. What appalling corporate social responsibility that was.

This is a testament to the breakdown of trust between Gemini and the workforce, and we have to fight hard to delay the statutory notice as much as possible, because there is a viable solution. The site is fundamentally viable. Indeed, it is believed that one opportunity would be provided through the electrification of the line. We have recently seen investment in the Edinburgh to Glasgow improvements, and this is only a short distance away. It is less than a mile to the site, and the electrification of the line into the works would allow more work to be accessed readily without using shunters. A previous proposal was considered by the coalition Government, and it was anticipated that capital costs of approximately £700,000 would be required at that time. I urge the UK and Scottish Governments to instruct Network Rail to action an immediate feasibility study to look into electrifying the line into St Rollox under control period 6 of Network Rail's funding.

I went to meet the workforce at the site, along with the MSPs from the area and the leader of the Scottish Labour party, Richard Leonard. We consulted the

workforce directly, and a meeting was subsequently held with the Scottish Transport Minister, Michael Matheson MSP. He has confirmed that officials at Transport Scotland and Scottish Enterprise have been working towards pulling together several organisations that are members of the rail supply network, along with potential customers for the services that Springburn provides. He has also asked that Gemini postpone the commencement of the closure consultation to allow all the options to be explored, and we are absolutely confident that there is a viable future for this site. It is fundamentally viable, and it has improved massively. Indeed, I visited it when I was working with Scottish Enterprise, and I was very impressed by its modern nature, its highly efficient operations and the work that had gone into massively improving its efficiency, safety and costs over the period of ownership by Knorr-Bremse. I am hopeful that that can be sustained. There is a model for restructuring that could happen.

I had the opportunity to meet the rail Minister earlier today, and we discussed the opportunities for the site. There is huge disruption in the rail industry in the UK with the onset of new rolling stock, but this site has endured disruptions and changes across the railway industry from the dawn of the railway age. It was built when the first railway was constructed in Scotland, and it can endure again in the future. There is an opportunity to restructure the site and I am hopeful, as I know ScotRail is, that it can be a strategic component of Scotland's rail industry long into the future. I believe that if the rail Minister is amenable to acting proactively and urgently with his counterpart in Scotland, we will be able to work collaboratively at all levels of Government to ensure that the site will endure for the next 150 years.

This is a huge opportunity for Scotland's railway industry, and I would hate to see that value, opportunity and potential destroyed simply to serve the short-term benefit of a private operator that is clearly treating its workforce with contempt. I want that operator to understand that the opportunity to be involved in the site is not just in its own self-interest, and that it is also an opportunity to defend and promote the growth of Scottish railway engineering long into the future. The only reason that the community of Springburn exists is because of the railway industry, and to lose the last vestige of the purpose and unifying identity that underpins our community would be hugely tragic. The worst thing is that the site is not a lame duck; it is entirely viable but it has been sold out by a lack of effort and entrepreneurial spirit on the part of its private management. We must wrest back control of the site and relaunch it for the future, to ensure that Scottish railway engineering can thrive long into this century.

2.3 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): It seems very late to be starting an Adjournment debate. Indeed, it is so late that we do not even have the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) with us.

I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) on securing this debate and on the passionate way he has spoken about this important industry in his constituency. We had a very positive meeting with him, the company and the unions earlier today, and I entirely recognise the fact that Gemini Rail Services' announcement on 12 December of a consultation

on proposals to close the depot had serious implications for all the people who work there, their families and the neighbouring communities. I recognise the impact that this announcement will have had on them.

I should also point out, as I did earlier on, that the Government do not have control over the direction of Gemini Rail Services, which is a private business. As it clarified in our meeting, this was a commercial decision taken in response to market conditions and the changes we are seeing as our rail network modernises, with new rolling stock coming into service. The provision of railway services that both begin and end in Scotland is a devolved matter, as is economic development. I know that the Scottish Government have engaged with the company and the unions about the planned closure and are taking action, to which I will return a little later.

This debate provides us with the opportunity to consider both the importance of the rail sector to the UK economy and the rail industry's prospects. Our rail industry is critical as one of this country's most vital and intensively used transport arteries. We rely upon it for the rapid movement of people and goods to the right destinations at the right time reliably and safely, day after day. On those measures, the UK rail industry has been a great success. Despite a huge increase in rail usage, we have one of the safest railways in Europe, with over 80% passenger satisfaction and over a billion more passenger journeys a year.

The Government are investing a record amount of money. The budget for the next control period—CP6, starting in April this year—is £48 billion to boost performance and sustain growth. The budget for the Scottish rail industry will be £4.8 billion. The provision of rail services in Scotland is obviously a matter for the Scottish Government, but I wanted to highlight that significant figure. The CP6 funding settlement provides more funding than would have been allocated under the Barnett formula, so it is a generous settlement that provides ample funding for the Scottish railway.

Mr Sweeney: The Minister is making a number of pertinent points, but the fundamental crux of this issue is that while it is a private decision for a private company at this point, it is clear that the company, ScotRail and Network Rail could work collaboratively to restructure the site to put it on a sound commercial footing and allow it to win business competitively. This is not about bailing something out or state aid for a failing industry; this is a kernel of expertise and a centre of excellence that could thrive with a restructuring of ownership. That would require urgent, robust intervention from both ScotRail, Transport Scotland, the Department for Transport and Network Rail. Does he agree that that is the way to proceed?

Andrew Jones: I am coming on to that. My point is that as we start this period of high investment, both on a UK basis and within Scotland, we will need the workforce and the supply chain to deliver on those ambitions. Companies such as Gemini Rail Services and the works at Springburn and hundreds of other companies up and down the country, including train firms and those designing signalling, all contribute to the modern rail industry that we need. Partnership between the public and private sectors has delivered real improvements, and I will come on to the hon. Gentleman's specific points.

The rail supply chain is a significant industry, and I do not think that people realise just how big it is. It employs over 225,000 people and adds £5.2 billion to our economy. I recognise that supply chain companies, in addition to being important players in the sector, are important within their communities, which was a key point made powerfully by the hon. Gentleman. That is why we have launched the rail sector deal. We need the industry and Government to create a partnership to deliver the jobs, skills and growth that we require. The deal is important and has several agreed outcomes, such as reducing the cost of digital signalling and ensuring that the supply chain better understands future demand, giving companies more confidence to invest in skills and innovation. Through the sector deal, the industry will deliver long-term education and a people strategy for the rail sector. These are important matters and, as the hon. Gentleman says, this plant can play a vital role, through the sector deal and through the supply chain work, in the rail industry of the future. The deal is about creating the capacity and capability for the rail industry to export more, helping to build more trading relationships with partners across the globe as we leave the EU.

I can understand why the hon. Gentleman has called this debate and why other colleagues have intervened, because this issue matters. No one wants to see industrial closures. That is especially true when there is such significant industrial heritage, which this plant very clearly has. From a basic human perspective, we all feel natural concern for all those who may lose their job, and there is also concern about the loss of skills from both the Scottish economy and the sector as a whole.

The company said earlier today that it is projecting a short way into the future but cannot see the supply chain or orders to keep the operation going, and it said that there might be some way of constructing a deal that would bring different parties together to construct an offer, and perhaps to change the nature of the work at the plant. I am very clear that that would be a fantastic opportunity, should it be possible. As I said in the meeting, I will write to the Scottish Transport Minister to highlight this debate and the concerns that have been expressed.

The hon. Gentleman talked of a consortium coming together for a deal, which would be a positive thing to happen. Speed will clearly be of the essence, and I will make sure that my communication with Mr Matheson, the Scottish Transport Minister, is prompt.

Network Rail could electrify part of its network to open more opportunities for electric rolling stock to be maintained at the plant. Such things need to be considered, but I entirely recognise the point about timeliness. Given the amount of money that rail electrification has been costing, £700,000 is a very small budget, but the point remains. Opportunity exists, and it should be taken.

Mr Sweeney: I thank the Minister for giving way once again. He says that urgency is critical in this situation, particularly when we have the sword of Damocles hanging over us with the serving of a statutory notice, which sets the clock ticking on a 45-day consultation, ultimately leading to the loss of those jobs, the dissipation of that skill critical mass and the closure of the site.

[Mr Sweeney]

It is particularly concerning that the company instructed its facilities manager to dump £1.2 million of materials in the form of paint, gangway strouds and brackets, and so on. That is a huge waste that the company is already prepared to write off. It stripped all the signage from the site over the weekend, so it is clear that we need to act urgently to urge the company to delay this, because there is an opportunity to salvage the site. The company has to act fairly in engaging with all stakeholders, state and private, to form a solution that can retain the jobs and integrity of the site. Currently, the omens are not good. Will the Minister write to the owners of the company urging them to hold their fire for now?

Andrew Jones: In the meeting this afternoon, the company said it would be very happy to participate in the consortium the hon. Gentleman describes, which seems very positive. I hope all sides will enter this opportunity with their eyes open and with a constructive attitude.

Chris Stephens: As well as writing to the Scottish Transport Minister, the Minister could press Network Rail on what it can do to save these jobs in the city of Glasgow.

Andrew Jones: The work stream that Network Rail takes north of the border is determined north of the border, so I would be cautious about any discourtesy to

Scottish Government colleagues by treading on their toes, but I understand the hon. Gentleman's point, which I will resolve with the Scottish Minister before taking any action. But if Network Rail can play a part, it should do so. If the company can play a part, it should do so. With the company, the local political leadership, the national political leadership and the trade unions all participating in a positive way, it is possible that this plant may be saved, with the injection of opportunity via some changes to infrastructure. Ultimately, however, it will need to have a supply chain of orders, otherwise it will continue to be loss-making and its future will not be sustainable.

As I was saying, the opportunity is significant, because of the sheer nature of the investment being made across our railway industry. Even though things are devolved in this area, I recognise that the UK Government can highlight issues and we can discuss issues here. I will take the actions that I have described to try to encourage all the parties to come together to form a deal. I hope that I have been able to demonstrate that the Government take seriously the importance of the supply sector into the industry and that the actions we can take, although limited because of the devolution settlement, might help this deal come to fruition. I would be very keen if it did.

Question put and agreed to.

2.15 am

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 14 January 2019

[DAVID HANSON *in the Chair*]

Leaving the EU

4.30 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petitions 229963, 221747 and 235185 relating to leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement, 232984 and 231461 relating to holding a further referendum on leaving the EU, and 226509 and 236261 relating to not leaving the EU.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. The list of e-petitions shows that Brexit still exercises our nation. If I may be indulged—this may take longer than the rest of my speech—I will read the text of the petitions, so that we know exactly what we are talking about. We have grouped them by theme. Not all of them have reached 100,000 signatures, but those that did not were similar enough to be put into one of three categories with others that reached the threshold for the Petitions Committee to consider them for debate.

The title of the first petition is “Leave the EU without a deal in March 2019.” It says:

“We are wasting Billions of pounds of taxpayers money trying to negotiate in a short space of time. Leaving the EU in March 2019 will allow the UK good time to negotiate more efficiently. The EU will be more eager to accept a deal on our terms having lost a major partner.

We will save billions of pounds from our EU divorce payment as well as a similar amount from Civil Service and Govt costs. This money will be used to support our own country whilst we await the EU to talk to us to make deals more in our favour. The EU border in Ireland to be managed simply by having a dual Euro / pound currency as legal tender in both the North and South. Exports to the South would be dealt with in Euro and vice versa when importing to the North. Rates fixed at time of the deal.”

A similar petition, entitled “Leave the EU now”, says simply:

“The Government is not going to achieve a satisfactory outcome from its negotiations with the EU. We should walk away now. No Deal is better than a bad deal.”

The third petition is, again, similar. It is entitled “Walk away now! We voted for a No Deal Brexit”. It says:

“Theresa May has failed to negotiate a Brexit deal that is acceptable to Parliament and the British people. The Withdrawal Agreement does not deliver the Brexit we voted for. It is clear that the EU is not going to offer anything else, particularly regarding the backstop. The Government must now be prepared to walk away from the negotiations.

No Deal is better than the Deal that has been negotiated. No Deal is also what we voted for. Give the people what they voted for. Anything less is not Brexit.”

I move on to the second group of petitions, which are about a second referendum. The first one is entitled “Grant a People’s Vote if Parliament rejects the EU Withdrawal Agreement”. It says:

“The Prime Minister has negotiated an EU withdrawal agreement. However, it is clear from resignations and interviews that the deal will not pass Parliament. As no credible alternative has been proposed, the public must be allowed to vote on whether to accept this deal or to remain in the EU.

Dominic Raab’s resignation is perhaps the strongest indication that this withdrawal agreement will not be approved by Parliament. However, he is responsible for this deal as former Brexit Secretary, which suggests that a better deal is not possible. The only better deal is to remain in the EU on similar terms to what we have now - not in Schengen, not in the Euro, deciding on EU legislation.”

Another petition on a second referendum says:

“It’s no secret that a vast amount of people who voted to leave the EU didn’t realise what they were voting for.

The Leave campaign said that leaving would create new trade deals, strengthen the economy and public services and reduce the number of incoming immigrants. But this is not happening.

Theresa May has really struggled so far in Brexit negotiations and time is running out. She’s failing to secure trade deals and my personal biggest fear is the Irish Border, this could lead to a United Ireland. May has lost support not only from the Cabinet but the whole nation. I’m calling for a second referendum”—

this is still part of the quote, please understand—

“because if you voted to remain or to leave we need a final say. The Brexit decision was so tight and I just think that it help everyone if there was a second vote. Sign if you agree.”

The third group of petitions is about stopping Brexit in its entirety. The first says:

“It’s so desperately simple. The Government’s standard response to these kinds of petitions is ‘The British people voted to leave the EU and the government respect that decision’. BUT, the government themselves DO NOT KNOW the outcome of that decision, so how can they possibly respect it???

Quote Theresa May: ‘We don’t know what the outcome will be’. The referendum was advisory, not conclusive. The result of the referendum has now been proven to be illegally biased (something ‘our’ government is choosing to ignore). Hence, the ‘vote’ (actually an opinion poll) is now null and void. The referendum was voted for with no indication of any actual facts. 2yrs ago there was no detail about what ‘brexit’ actually entailed. Today, still no detail. For all these reasons: STOP BREXIT.”

The final petition is a short one: “Stop Brexit if parliament rejects the deal”. It says:

“Brexit is not worth it. A hard border in Ireland will destroy the Good Friday Agreement, meds are being stockpiled and there’s news that a contract has been given to a company with no ferries, and the army is on standby in the event of no-deal too. Stop Brexit if MPs vote to reject the PM’s deal.”

It took me the first five minutes of my speech just to read out those seven petitions, none of which agrees. This is where we are as a country. In this place, we reflect the views of the people outside. The number of signatories to those petitions ranged from 6,000 for the smallest to 330,000-odd for the biggest. Any number of people have supported the petitions. That is what is great about Petitions Committee debates: we talk about the things that people ask us to speak about.

The Government deal is being debated in Parliament today. One reason why not many Members are present is that the Prime Minister is in the main Chamber making a statement about the last assurances she has had from the EU. Members will raise questions with her, then the debate will continue, and the vote will take place tomorrow. The deal is, undoubtedly, a compromise. I campaigned and voted to leave, but I will vote for the deal tomorrow because I see it as the best way to leave in an orderly fashion. It is not perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but it could be made good in the second half of the negotiation.

Unfortunately for people who are bored with Brexit, we are only halfway through. If we can get an agreement through to the next stage, we have to deal with the future relationship with the EU. It will take time to

[*Paul Scully*]

reach a trade deal and get through all the finer points of security, education, research co-operation and so on. When I looked at the deal and thought about how I would vote tomorrow, I asked, “Does it fulfil the reasons I voted to leave? Can I look other people in the eye and say, ‘Yes, it does?’” Under the deal, we leave the EU political institutions—the biggest thing that drove me when I voted for the Referendum party back in 1997, which is what got me into party politics. This is my penance for having brought in a Labour Government and a Lib Dem local MP.

I wanted to leave the political institutions. This deal allows us to do that, and to end the huge membership fees we pay the EU. It enables us to end freedom of movement, and to start to negotiate trade deals and even ratify them, though we cannot put them in place until we have left the implementation phase—as long as the backstop does not come in. If we have a deal in place with the EU, we can move on to putting those independent trade deals in place. That is why the deal is imperfect—because, looking back to two years ago, by now I would have hoped to be at that place. However, I make my decision based on where we are, not where we started.

We got stuck on the sequencing—the fact that we could not have a twin-track debate on our future relationship and withdrawing, and we got stuck on the Irish backstop issue last year. That has suddenly become a thing over the last year. We are kidding ourselves if we think that we will be able to remove the backstop because we do not like it. I understand the argument about us not being able to leave the backstop unilaterally; naturally, that causes concern to a lot of people. That is why I have asked a lot of questions of Ministers, the Prime Minister and others. The explanation of the backstop sets out why both parties find it uncomfortable, but that is not good enough for me; I want to know why they find it uncomfortable. I have been asking questions and looking at the issue in closer detail. Interestingly, politically, the backstop is incredibly difficult for Unionists, but economically it would be pretty advantageous to Northern Ireland, should it ever come into use. Why? Because overnight, Northern Ireland would then become the most competitive part of Europe.

As part of the compromise with the EU, the whole country would get brought into the backstop. That would give us full access to the single market and the customs union, having left it, without paying any membership fees. Imagine what France, for example, thinks about that. For once, it would be subsidising us; it would still be paying full membership fees for the same access. It cannot be comfortable about that. We would not have freedom of movement, but we would have the same access, so we would be breaking one of the pillars of the EU. Members may remember that at the beginning of the referendum debate, the EU said, “We will not allow the UK to cherry-pick,” but that is exactly what would happen under that system: we would be cherry-picking, because we would still have access, but we would not have freedom of movement or make payments. To my mind, although the rhetoric is sufficient to prove to people that the EU is punishing us for leaving, the actuality—what is written on the bit of paper—is inconvenient but would in no way punish us in the long term.

The final reason the EU finds the backstop uncomfortable is that, suddenly, the whole of the UK would become its backstop should it want to strike further trade deals with other countries. Countries looking to finalise trade deals with the EU will say, “Okay, we understand how we’re going to trade with you and what that’s going to be like, but what about the top-left corner of the map? What about the whole of the UK? What’s its relationship going to be with you? We don’t really understand this.” It will mean those countries dragging their heels even more than they do now.

Some people describe leaving with no deal as leaving on World Trade Organisation terms. As I was preparing for the debate, I had a Twitter chat with a constituent, who said, “Well, it’s not no deal; it’s WTO arrangements.” That is fine—people can call it what they want—but WTO arrangements do not cover non-trade issues. The WTO is only about trade; the withdrawal agreement goes so much further than that.

I would be comfortable leaving with no deal if we were properly prepared, and we had done everything we could to have as orderly a departure as possible. As I said, I believe the withdrawal agreement, although it is not perfect, allows us to do that. Anyone who proposes no deal has to recognise that there would be short-term turbulence. One of the reasons why I am uncomfortable having no deal as my first position is that it would affect real people. When I cast my vote, I always have at the front of my mind what it will mean for my constituents and other actual people. I do not think, “It’s just something on a bit of paper that will be okay later on.”

There will be short-term turbulence. We can survive it; we will get through it. None the less, there are better ways of leaving, and I do not think we would be thanked in the short term for leaving with no deal. If we have the confidence to say, “You know what? We can leave on WTO terms and go it alone. We can work with the other 192 countries and strike our own trade deals,” surely we should have the same confidence that we can get this deal through, go to the European Union with a different negotiating strategy and say, “Look, we want an overarching, ambitious trade deal with you that’s actually going to work for both of us.”

How would that negotiating strategy work? Negotiations cannot all be done by one small cabal of people. We have brought Crawford Falconer, a hugely experienced trade negotiator, in from New Zealand; it does not make sense for him to work on every trade deal around the world apart from the biggest one—the one with next door. Surely it makes sense for him and the Department for International Trade to work on trade. We could then get the Brexit Secretary to work on the overarching issues, and the Defence Secretary and the Home Secretary to work on defence, immigration and security. We should have a far wider-reaching set of negotiations. As well as bringing in expertise and a wider group of people, that would help engender trust, which is sadly lacking in this entire process. One of the reasons why people cannot get beyond a certain point in the debate is that no matter what is said, they just do not believe it. That is the problem.

People are also concerned about our paying the reported £39 billion in advance. The implementation phase is nearly two years, so £24 billion of that is the equivalent of a membership fee. We are quibbling about £15 billion, which is still a lot of money, but it is not

quite the same. We need to work out where that money is going, how the figure is worked out, and at what point we pay it.

The idea of a second referendum has increased in popularity, but I struggle to see how it will get off the ground. Clearly, anything like having a second referendum or revoking article 50 in its entirety would need to come from the Government, because it would need primary legislation. There is clearly no agreement on what the question would be in a second referendum. Some people have said to me, “Hold on a sec. In 2016, we had leave or remain. Leave won, so that’s sorted. Surely remain shouldn’t even be on the ballot paper; the question should be how we leave.” People with a slightly different point of view, shall we say, have said, “The Government shouldn’t be leaving with no deal, so it should be between remain and the Prime Minister’s deal.” We would be back to all the same vested interests I mentioned at the start.

People talk about how divisive the original referendum was and how terrible the quality of the debate was—frankly, both those things are true—but then say, “I tell you what: let’s do it all again.” I know what would happen. We would have “vassal state” on one side and “cliff edge” on the other. There would be a lot of heat but no light whatever. Lord knows what the buses would do at that point.

I tend to agree with the chap who said:

“I’m sorry, I’m not one of those people who thinks we should be calling for a second referendum. I think that would just look like, the referendum was fought under rules we agreed to, a result was delivered, because we don’t like it we now want to replay it again—which will simply entrench a view that we’re some elite, who don’t want to pay any attention to the people.”

That chap was the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna), who happens to be spearheading the people’s vote campaign—I should think he is doing so as we speak. A second referendum is unlikely to resolve anything; nor do I believe a general election would resolve anything.

That brings me to why this place is so divided. There is a lot of self-interest at the moment. The Leader of the Opposition could draft his own deal and hand it to the Prime Minister to put to the vote, and he would still vote against it. He wants a general election—that is all. Obviously, there are splits in the Opposition. Opposition Members who want a people’s vote tend to want to avoid a general election because that would be their worst nightmare. It would risk a Labour Government led by the Leader of the Opposition, which I do not think Opposition Members who propose a people’s vote particularly want; they are not exactly close.

The Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National party basically want to pretend this never happened. They just want to unpick the referendum. For various reasons, they want not to leave the UK. At least that is an honest position. The Lib Dems write things like “Let’s have a people’s vote,” followed by “#ExitFromBrexit”. That clearly demonstrates the angle they come at this from. I have yet to meet someone who voted to leave and still intends to leave who says, “I tell you what, before we do, shall we just test the water by having a second referendum?” Inevitably, people want that Bobby Ewing moment—they want to wake up and find that he is still in the shower. At least the people who want to unpick the referendum by revoking article 50 are honest and explain their true intentions, but that would have

severe consequences. The Archbishop of York talked about the possibility of a second referendum causing civil unrest.

We have come to this place and listened to people. Some 17.4 million people put their trust in us doing what they mandated us to do. One of the petitions refers to the vote we had as an opinion poll. It was not; it was a national referendum, which delivered a bigger mandate than any other vote in this country. I cannot remember the figures, but many Members queued up to vote to trigger article 50. In so doing, we put the referendum result into legislation, making those people’s voices heard. We need to redouble our efforts and find a deal that works, so that we can leave the EU in the most orderly fashion possible, demonstrate to people that we can do this and respect their wishes, and move on and gain the inevitable benefits of leaving the EU.

4.50 pm

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I agree with much of what the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) said, except his final conclusion that somehow this deal is a way forward. There are a number of reasons why it is not. First, it is not a deal; it is an agreement to have negotiations for a final deal. On Sunday, Neil Warnock, the manager of Cardiff City—I am not used to quoting him on his political stance or on football matters—spoke for probably the majority of the United Kingdom when he said that the Government should get on and implement what the people had decided in the referendum. After two and half years, that should happen, but the Government have not done so. They have come back with an agreement to negotiate that the Prime Minister should be embarrassed about. It leaves control over the end of that negotiation, and over whether Northern Ireland has different laws from the rest of the United Kingdom, subject to a different legislature. That is an outrage. It is an embarrassment to the Prime Minister and a disgrace to the country that anybody, of whichever political party, would bring back a deal like that.

The debate on the petitions ranges all over the place, but it is worth going back to the referendum. The wording of the referendum was unambiguous and unconditional. There was no condition on the ballot paper. It was absolutely clear that if people voted one way they were voting to remain in the EU, and if they voted in the other box they were voting to leave. The Prime Minister has not managed to deliver the result. Since then, we have had a vote to trigger article 50, which passed by a huge majority. In many cases, although not in all, remainers have looked for ways to undermine the decision, even though it was unconditional and unambiguous. A number of statements have been made, which at first sound quite sensible. I hear regularly in the Chamber, and I have heard it said here, that people did not vote to make themselves poorer. I know they did not—it is true—but they did not vote to make themselves richer. They voted to leave the European Union.

The statement that people did not vote to make themselves poorer has two implications. One is that people never vote to make themselves poorer—that it would be absurd even to think that. But a moment’s thought shows that that is absolutely not true. Right hon. and hon. Members in this Chamber regularly

[Graham Stringer]

stand for election on manifestos that contain tax commitments. Tax commitments are a way of confiscating people's income and capital resources, and they make people poorer. We all vote for them, and we all stand on manifestos that make people poorer, usually for social and public benefit. I think it is a nonsensical statement. It appears to have credibility—who could disagree with it?—but its objective and purpose are to undermine the democratic decision that was taken by more than 17.4 million people, as the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam said.

The other implication is that being in the EU always makes us richer and never makes us poorer, and that its decisions always benefit the people of the United Kingdom and the EU. That is demonstrably not true. As a member of the Labour party for many years who opposed the monetarism of the early 1980s, I am astonished that members of the Labour party are so wedded to the EU, which has at the core of its policies the stability and growth pact. The stability and growth pact is, in fact, monetarism; it is Thatcherism internationalised. It is not just abstract thought. It is one of the reasons why youth across the whole of southern Europe have lost the democratic right to determine what happens in Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain, and why there is a whole generation of young people on the dole. The situation has been created by the macroeconomic policies at the centre of EU policy. The policy does not just affect those people; by deflating the EU economy, it affects our ability to export there.

There are many examples of perverse EU decisions that have led, and will lead, to job losses. Last summer, the European Court of Justice, in line with what the EU Commission had said, ruled that the CRISPR-Cas9 technology, which is about inserting parts of genes into crops, was unlawful. That decision has been widely condemned throughout the scientific community as anti-scientific and as having “a chilling effect” on research and the economy. The rest of the world is happy to get on with it, because this technology, where it exists, leads to a drop of about a third in the use of herbicides and a 20% increase in crops. That decision will damage UK and European science, and related jobs in science and agriculture, and it may lead to less food. It is extraordinary that the CRISPR technology has, in effect, been banned, while new crops created by random genetic mutation—using irradiation, so there is no controlling what happens—are allowed.

I use those examples—one economic one, at the huge end of things, and a specific scientific one—to illustrate the point that it is nonsensical to think that the EU always makes decisions that lead to more jobs, more growth and better science. It simply does not. I believe fundamentally that we would get better regulations if we made them ourselves, for our own industry and science, rather than having them designed to fit across the 27 or 28 countries of the EU.

Another argument that is made for a second referendum, or for not implementing the 2016 referendum, is that people did not understand what they were voting for. As I said, it was a simple proposition, and people did know what they were voting for—to leave the European Union. Having talked during the period of the referendum to people I represent from some of the poorest estates

in the country, it is fairly clear to me that they knew exactly what they were voting for. It is an insult to them to say they did not know. The implication is that the educated, cosmopolitan elite are superior, and that their votes should weigh more than the votes of people in poorer parts of the country without degrees and A-levels. I do not believe that, and I guess that if it is stated explicitly, most people in the Chamber do not believe it, but that is at the base of “didn't understand it”. If people did not understand a simple proposition such as the one about leaving the European Union, how are they going to understand the pre-negotiation agreement, with its 585—or perhaps it is 685—pages of nonsensical legal script? They are not going to. It is ludicrous to pretend that that is easier to understand than the simple proposition.

Also, if we are to ignore the first referendum, what credibility would a second have? What credibility would any future referendum have? Would we have to say, when it was agreed to hold a referendum, “We'll have a first one, and if it goes the way the establishment would not like, we will make it the best of three”? That is what the proposition for a second referendum is like. We should not proceed with a second referendum. We have had many debates about it here and on the Floor of the House, and we should not have another.

I have one further point to make about the economic impact of the EU. It is assumed not just that the EU is economically beneficial to us, but that stopping the current trading arrangements, under which we are in the EU internal market, would be wholly negative. We are running a huge trade deficit of between £70 billion and £80 billion a year. I think that if the rules are changed we will get a lot of substitution. Jobs will be created here, because any tariffs—and possibly a drop in the pound—would make it cheaper to manufacture here. Why we consider it so economically advantageous to us to be in an internal market where we have a huge trade deficit, I do not know.

It is worth thinking about why the EU had done as it has. We are in complete regulatory alignment with it, and it has a trade surplus with us. We have been paying a lot of money into it. The reason why many of the university exchanges work is, to put it bluntly, that our top universities are better than the EU's. To take a simple criterion such as the number of Nobel awards, one college at Cambridge has won more Nobel prizes than the top universities in the EU. They need our universities. So what motivates the European Commission to be so unaccommodating in the negotiation? I do not think it is to do with trade. The Commission is prepared to punish EU citizens by coming to what is, from their point of view, a bad deal, given their trade surplus, because it does not want any other states to follow our example. I think that it is partly its non-democratic nature that is responsible for what is happening around the EU—not only economic problems on the southern coast, but the rise of the far right in many countries. It is extraordinary that in my political lifetime there should be a party of the far right in Sweden, and that Sweden—one of the great, long-standing democracies in Europe—should not be able to form a Government. There are other strands to the reasons for the resurgence of the right in Europe, but one is that people can no longer vote for Governments that will do what they want them to, because those factors are determined by the EU.

If it came to a no deal—although frankly it would be better for us to have our cake and eat it, and have a deal beneficial to EU citizens and to us—would it be the end of the world? I agree with the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam that it would not. There would be some short-term disruption, but nothing like the disruption suggested in what the BBC propagates, or in the regular cries of woe heard on the Floor of the House of Commons. However, there is bound to be some disruption. We heard from the sub-prefecture of Calais that there would be no halting of goods there—and why would there be? Why would countries try to make it more difficult for their own industries to export? It has always been a put-up job—the idea that somehow, in support of the European Commission, the French would not want to sell us wine, but would want the people producing wine in Bordeaux, Burgundy and the Rhône valley to be poorer. That is an extraordinary proposition. The same would be true of Spain and other European countries.

Those things are not going to happen, but when anything is changed there will be some short-term disruption. Because we would be making our own laws, in a very short time there would be major benefits. We would also keep most of the £39 billion that the House of Lords EU Financial Affairs Sub-Committee said we had no legal obligation to pay. That would probably give a 2% boost to our GDP. Incidentally, I think I would go to Mystic Meg for predictions about the economy before I would go to the Bank of England, which said that the mere vote to leave the EU would lead to half a million job losses after 23 June. How many jobs were lost? More jobs were created. Yet people regularly state on the floor of the House of Commons that we will have an economic disaster, based not only on the Bank of England but on other think tanks and institutions that are using the same failed models, which do not allow for the flexibility and substitution that exist in the market in this country.

In a more general sense, most of our trade is done under World Trade Organisation rules anyway; most of the world trades under World Trade Organisation rules. I am not saying it is better than what we have—it is not—but it is adequate. The car industry has bleated quite a lot, but the imports of parts are not solely from the EU. Some come from other parts of the world economy. The rest of the world is also where most of the growth is. The EU has been one of the slowest-growing parts of the world economy. It is in Asia, the United States and even South America that most of the growth is occurring, so I do not think we have a great deal to be frightened of on those matters.

I have covered a lot of ground, and one could cover more, because the petitions themselves cover a huge amount of ground, from staying to leaving to what the impact will be. The view that I have set out may not be the majority view in my party or in the House of Commons, but it is the majority view in the country, as the 2016 referendum showed. I remind hon. Members of what the Prime Minister at the time, David Cameron, said—that the people are sovereign. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said in response, “This is not for Members to decide; it is for you, the public, to decide what happens.” It would be quite wrong for us to stop now.

Sadly, the Government have not come back with a deal after two and a half years, and I will vote against what they have come back with. I agree with the leader of my party that if there is a general election, it may well help to put pressure on the Commission, but one thing we know: if this pretty appalling deal is rejected, the EU is master, or mistress, of the last-minute deal. The EU will suffer more than the UK in absolute terms, although less in percentage terms, if there is no reasonable agreement on 29 March. I do not think tomorrow is the end of the story. I think the Prime Minister should have said at the beginning, “We are not accepting a ridiculous deal like this.” She needs either to go back to the Commission and get a better deal, or to go back to the people; hopefully, the Labour party would then get a mandate to negotiate a better deal.

5.13 pm

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I will speak in support of the petition that has received more than 300,000 signatures and argues that we should leave the EU on World Trade Organisation terms.

Clearly, a free trade agreement with the EU is optimal. I am an economic liberal and I believe in the benefits of free trade and open markets. However, leaving the EU under the Prime Minister’s deal will restrict our ability to sign free trade agreements with the most exciting and fastest-growing economies in the world. That cannot be allowed to happen. The withdrawal agreement will make the UK a vassal state, a country whose destiny is controlled by the EU and its institutions. That cannot be allowed to happen; it would be a sell-out of the British people.

Leaving on WTO terms should not panic the UK. There are positives to leaving under such a deal when compared with the Prime Minister’s disastrous deal. If we want to take back control of our money, our laws and our borders, keep our £39 billion and trade freely with the rest of the world, a clean WTO Brexit will achieve that. Some in this place have warned that negotiating a new free trade agreement with third parties will be more difficult and we will not be able to achieve such good terms as those negotiated through the European Union, but I believe that argument is flawed.

We all know that the EU is cumbersome; it is over-bureaucratic and full of red tape. For free trade agreements to be signed off in the EU they must be approved by every member state, so the economies and priorities of 27 nations, including individual regions, must be considered. When negotiating our own free trade deals, we can be proactive and seek out opportunities. We can be flexible while the EU is rigid. We can be fast and nimble while the EU is slow and cumbersome. The UK will be free and liberated to sign free trade agreements with the exciting economies of tomorrow.

Let us not talk down the UK. We are the fifth largest economy in the world and a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and we speak the global language of business. We have world-class universities and an incredible global reach, and we sit at the heart of the Commonwealth, which is home to 2.4 billion citizens. I could not be prouder to say that I am British and believe in Great Britain and the United Kingdom. We will succeed no matter what lies in our future; we will prevail because our strength and dynamism lie with the British people, not in being part of the European Union.

[*Andrea Jenkyns*]

The reason we are here today is that the Prime Minister's deal has failed. She has failed to achieve a deal that is good for the UK, but this is the deal before us. The President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, has stated:

"I am totally convinced that this is the only deal possible."

The EU's chief Brexit negotiator, Michel Barnier, has told the European Parliament that

"the treaty that is on the table is the only deal possible."

The President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, has also said that the deal agreed is the only possible one, as has our Prime Minister. Let us not forget what the Opposition's shadow Secretary of State for International Trade, the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), said about Labour's Brexit plan—I will not use the swear word in the Chamber that he used then.

Graham Stringer: He was right.

Andrea Jenkyns: Therefore, if politicians want to respect the outcome of the referendum, WTO becomes a legitimate option and it is right that we are here today discussing it. The world has benefited hugely from the considerable progress made in trade liberalisation in the past 70 years, but multilateral liberalisation has slowed and it now needs a new champion. The UK can be that champion. The benefits of free trade are clear to see. The world needs a liberalising voice, and the UK can be that voice at a time when open markets are threatened.

The UK will prosper as a WTO member. We can immediately start further liberalisation with other WTO members on day one. I acknowledge that tariffs are a concern for some, but I ask them to keep in mind my desire for fewer tariffs and fewer restrictions to trade. Currently, under WTO rules, tariffs vary significantly by sector, but we need to see the bigger picture. In the 1980s, the EU's share of world GDP was about 30%. In 2017 it was about 16% and by 2022 it is expected to fall further to 15%. The EU has a shrinking share of world trade, and Brexiteers can see the benefits of trading freely with the rest of the world, which is growing at a much faster rate than the EU.

The organisation Economists for Free Trade recently released a detailed report that considered the many implications of leaving the EU on WTO terms. In my view, the report shows that, although a deal is preferable, we have nothing to fear from leaving on those terms. From an economic perspective, the report showed that under WTO rules, we would be more prosperous as a country than we are now, and a lot better off than under the Prime Minister's withdrawal agreement, which would leave us worse off by a staggering £100 billion. The report also showed that under no deal, consumer prices would fall by 8% and there would be an additional boost of 15% to the poorest households. I know many of my constituents would welcome that at a time when ordinary families are feeling the pressure.

It is important to note that since the mid-1980s, British exports to WTO countries have grown three times faster than those to the European single market. In fact, our biggest overseas market is America, and we trade with it on WTO terms. All that, taken together, demonstrates that, despite all the fear-mongering and

demonisation of no deal, the reality is that there is nothing to fear. We already conduct much of our trade under those terms, which are essentially a set of global, enforceable rules that outlaw protectionist tricks, discriminatory tariffs and bureaucratic hurdles. The result is free and fair trade for us and our global partners.

After we leave, trade between the UK and the EU can move to WTO rules, meaning tariffs averaging about 3%. Some products have higher tariffs, such as cars, at 10%, with a 4.5% tariff on components from the EU. However, car companies can withstand a 10% tariff on sales into the EU because they have already benefited from a 15% depreciation in the value of sterling. Border checks on components from the EU will be unnecessary, counterproductive for EU exporters, and illegal under WTO rules, which prohibit unnecessary checks. The heads of firms such as Dyson, JCB and Northern Ireland's Wrightbus support Brexit because they see the long-term benefits of our being free from the EU's red tape. A WTO Brexit can achieve that.

I may have agreed with the decision to leave the EU, but it was the British people, not politicians in this place, who decided to leave, and their decision must be upheld. I was only elected to this place in 2015. I am not a career politician and I never worked in the Westminster bubble before being elected. I may not have had the traditional route into politics, but I strongly think that that is a positive. Trust in elected politicians is vital if the public are to have faith in this place and in the democratic process. I aim to uphold that trust. It is naïve to think that we know better.

My constituents know best: they know how best to run their lives and spend their money, and they know what is best for their country. They voted for Brexit, and Brexit must prevail, be that under a WTO Brexit or under a better deal than that agreed by the Prime Minister. My constituency, the Yorkshire and the Humber region and the country voted to leave the EU. We need to leave the European Union and its institutions and take advantage of the opportunities that Brexit can deliver.

I wanted a deal like the Prime Minister's vision in her Lancaster House speech, which would have satisfied the referendum result. However, the Prime Minister decided, mistakenly, to no longer pursue that vision. Moving to WTO rules will achieve that global Britain vision. We want to be in Europe but not run by Europe. We want to be a truly global, free-trading powerhouse. That can still be achieved, but only by trading under WTO rules. Let us now look to the future, where we can all be free from the EU, to make our own decisions and to chart our own destiny.

5.22 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): This may be the first time I have served under your chairship, Mr Hanson. It is a pleasure to do so.

I am a patriot. I love my country. Serving my neighbours, estate, city and country is the most important thing I can do with my life, which is why I come here every week. I leave my family on a Monday morning and desperately hope to get back by the time I said I would, not breaking any promises along the way. I find that that is the best way to do it.

This week we arrive at the significant crossroads that we have been approaching for several weeks. There are a number of paths ahead of us, each with its own advantages and disadvantages. Some options will please some people, others will please other people, and none will please everybody. In fact, I presume that every option will anger significant portions of our society. I say that as a preamble because when talking to friends in a more relaxed setting over Christmas—this may have happened to other hon. Members as well—people would try desperately not to talk about Brexit, but eventually somebody would ask why it is taking so long. This debate, and the petitions that sit behind it, show precisely why it is taking so long. The subject is difficult and unclear, and there are multiple points of view.

I attended this debate because I think it neatly encapsulates that. The arguments in favour of the Prime Minister's deal, as well as those in favour of no deal, a new deal and another vote, all have things going for them—that is not a very popular thing to say, but I believe it to be true—but they also have a lot not going for them. Those who support those options do so with a deep passion, and those who do not often oppose them with a deep anger. I believe that virtually everybody holds a sincere belief that their course is the correct one to follow.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) skilfully introduced the debate, which covers such a broad and contrasting set of views. However, it is interesting that each of the petitions states as fact assertions that the others say are not facts. That shows that this is a difficult subject, which is why it is up to us in this place—we have put up our hands and said that we, as patriots, want to lead our local communities and our country because we care about them—to pick through it and arrive at a solution that serves our nation's best interests.

Tomorrow will be our first test. Our first choice will be laid out in front of us—whether to accept to Prime Minister's deal or not. I will vote against the Prime Minister's deal. I cannot in good conscience bind our nation to a 585-page legally binding withdrawal agreement in pursuit of a well-meant but non-binding political declaration. I believe that this document threatens our historic Union and, frankly, that it does not please or deliver for those who wish to leave or to remain.

The deal is the result of the sum total of 31 months of negotiation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) said, probably rather more artfully than me, it is a pre-agreement rather than a deal. Do we think that we will have negotiated a comprehensive deal by the end of 2020? No, of course not; I do not think anybody believes that. We could therefore apply the extension. Do we think we will have negotiated a deal by the end of 2022? Using the narrowest definition, the EU-Canada comprehensive economic and trade agreement took five years of pure negotiation. Do we think that we could do it in less than four years? Has anything suggested that that could happen?

Before Christmas, the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) and I were on our local television channel, Notts TV, as we often are. We always seem to get paired together; I think it is something to do with being younger Members. I am sure that we agree on many things about the world in general, but on political matters he and I disagree on quite a few. We discussed where Brexit would go in the new year and began to

agree that the withdrawal agreement may in time become so attractive to the EU27 that it becomes the deal itself. The hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) said that getting deals done with the EU requires the consent of all 27 other countries, one of which might say, "You know what? We've got quite a good relationship here. Why don't we just stick with it?" That risk is another reason why it is not worth supporting the deal.

I read and took seriously what the Prime Minister said earlier today, as I always do. Obviously, I have not heard what has been said in the Chamber, but I suspect it was closely related. I do not take much comfort from the letters from the European Council, either, although I understand where they come from and the intentions behind them. The Prime Minister has said that she will not be here at the end of 2022. How many more leaders on the European Council will have gone by then? The answer is plenty. I therefore cannot in good conscience swap the legal certainty of what will happen to our country in the future for the assurances on a letterhead from those leaders, many of whom will not be here at that time. That seems to me a very poor trade. I am surprised anybody would be persuaded to make it.

The probable outcome, as has been said for a long time, is that the Prime Minister's deal will fall tomorrow. No deal is not and should not be an option. The trade arguments are well played out. At the end of last year I visited Toyota outside Derby to see its just-in-time manufacturing operating model, and it was clear that any delay in the system would be very injurious to it. The economic shock resulting from tariff barriers will be felt by my community, one of the poorest in the country. That cannot happen.

We talk a lot about the economic impact of no deal, but we rarely talk about the security implications. The Select Committee on Home Affairs produced a very good report on that subject. We took a lot of very good evidence from people with differing views. We covered the Schengen Information System II, which ensures that violent criminals, possible terrorists and paedophiles from other countries cannot get into our country; they get the tap on the shoulder, go to a side room and do not come into our country. That database, which we check 500 million times a year, relates to people who present at a UK port. We do not know about it, but it keeps us safe in our beds.

I do not agree with the argument made by the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood about WTO trading terms, but it was well made and I respect it. However, the WTO provides no fall-back in relation to security. I know that people will push for a no-deal option, which is valid. I understand that, and I get emails to that effect. However, those who do so should explain what would happen to someone who presented at a port at 12.1 am—one minute after we have left the EU, while the fireworks or whatever are going on—who would previously have got that tap on the shoulder and not been allowed into our country. The answer to that question is critical, but I do not think there is one; our Committee's inquiry certainly could not find one. As a result, I do not think that any responsible Government ought to countenance no deal.

I shall put that to one side and move on. It is well known that Labour Members seek a general election, as the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam said, so that

[Alex Norris]

we can secure new leadership on this issue and, of course, many others, although this is probably not the moment to go through them. Having said that, I am not averse to a trip to the bookies and I am very aware that the bookies do not think that we will win in our pursuit of a general election any more than the Prime Minister is likely to win tomorrow night, so let us say that both of those fall. What happens then? It means that, come Wednesday or onwards, into early next week, Parliament as a whole will have a real job to find something that respects the referendum result but does not damage our country.

I am here today—I take the chance to speak to and engage with Government Front Benchers when I can—to appeal for a change of tone. I say this very personally. There is no party politics in this; it is my personal feeling. It is a culmination of 18 months of frustration, because I feel that we have been derided throughout this process. I was elected in June 2017, and I feel that since then those of us on the Opposition Benches have been told that we cannot count, that we do not read the documents—that is always a good one—that we are not being honest in our intentions and when we say we are pursuing one goal, we are actually pursuing a second, secret goal, or that we are playing politics in what we do. I believe those to be unfair and untrue charges. As I said at the beginning of my speech, I come here because I want to serve my city and my community.

I believe that the Government will have to change their tone because, frankly, whether it is on Wednesday morning, Thursday morning or next week, the Government will need support from Opposition Members. It does not take a political strategy genius, which I am not, to say this. We are getting to the point at which we know what there is not a majority for in Parliament. We know or may well find that there is not a majority for the Prime Minister's deal. We know from last week that there is not one for no deal. If it is shown that there is not one for a general election, either, we will become defined by what we know there is not a majority for. That means that we will have to look at what there is a majority for, and we will start with the biggest blocs, which are the Government's payroll vote and Members on the Opposition Front Bench. The Government will have to engage with the Opposition. Labour Members are derided for not having a position on Brexit, but our priorities have been on the website for a long time. We have been talking about a customs union for a long time. We have talked about migration, rights at work—

Graham Stringer: My hon. Friend is right to say that there is no majority in the House of Commons for a general election at present—partly because a two-thirds majority is needed under the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011—but does he really believe that if the Prime Minister loses tomorrow by more than 100 votes and potentially 200 votes, this Government will have any credibility left at all if the central plank of their existence has failed by so many votes in the House of Commons? Is not the only honourable thing to do to have a general election and see what the public think?

Alex Norris: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I would not presume to explain any elements of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act to him, given that he legislated it and I did not, but as well as his reference to a

two-thirds majority, the failure to achieve a second vote of confidence within 14 days will automatically lead to a general election. However, I take the point that, on the issue of the day, on the sum total of 31 months of work and leadership—what we are answering tomorrow is the product of all that work—if that fails, it is a fundamental failure for the Government and one that I do not think could be seen off. I think we ought all to be careful, certainly on the Opposition Benches, about setting what we think are good and bad losses. Any loss on this issue is devastating for the Government, whatever the number is.

If they want to carry on, the Government will have to engage with the Opposition on the presupposition that we want to engage on the issue, that we want to make things better and that we might want to find a solution, all of which has been said so far. We all might—this would be of benefit outside the House as well as inside—try to change the way we engage with each other. The petitions show the need for that. They start with assertions that are not necessarily facts; they are just strongly held views, and we all have strongly held views. And we all come at the issue—I assume this is true of all hon. Members present—from the perspective of what we believe is best for our country, so perhaps we ought to engage with one another on those terms, rather than on the basis of what fits into 140 or, now, 280 characters and going down to those very pure binaries. Frankly, if we do not show that there is a parliamentary solution in this place—I have talked about the things that there perhaps are not majorities for—where does that leave this issue? Hon. Members who might passionately have wanted to see a particular goal achieved might end up not getting it at all.

5.35 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson, and an honour to follow the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris). I congratulate my fellow member of the Petitions Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), on the way in which he opened the debate on these petitions.

The referendum vote was the single biggest democratic exercise in our nation's history. More people voted in that referendum than had voted in any election before, and many people who had never voted before voted. I have spoken to many people in my constituency who had never voted before. Some people had voted many years ago and given up voting because they felt that their vote did not make any difference, but they voted in that referendum because they felt that it was their opportunity to make their voice heard and to bring about change. A clear majority voted to leave. As has been well documented, 17.4 million people had the courage, despite "Project Fear"—despite all the predictions of doom and gloom, the world ending, the economy crashing and half a million jobs going—to say, "No, we are voting for change." They did not vote for things to be almost the same; they voted because they wanted things to be different.

The responsibility is now on us in Parliament to deliver on the result. In bringing about the referendum, we made the position clear to the British public. In fact, the Prime Minister at the time, David Cameron, famously said that we were putting the decision in the hands of the British people and we would implement whatever decision they made. This was not a decision to be made

by politicians—not a decision to be made by Parliament—but a decision that the British people would make, and Parliament would implement what they decided.

That was two and a half years ago; indeed, it is coming up to three years ago, and here we are, in this very significant week in Parliament in the process of us implementing the decision that the British people made in the referendum. We have a huge challenge before us. The challenge is this: are we going to do what the British people instructed us to do, or not? For me, this whole process has become about far more than simply whether we leave the EU. It has become about trust in our democratic process. We need to understand that there is a growing sense among many, many people in our country—I receive countless emails; I get them virtually every day expressing this concern—that we are in the middle of an establishment stitch-up. The view is that there is an attempt to prevent us from leaving the EU—that the establishment will somehow manufacture a technical outcome that means we do not actually leave. I have to say that the events of last week and some of the newspaper headlines in the last few days have heightened that genuine concern. I believe that, the people of this country having been told that we were giving them the decision and the choice, the consequences of us now not delivering on that decision would be incredibly serious for our country.

We are here today to debate a number of petitions regarding our leaving the EU. As we have heard, some are calling for us to leave immediately, some are calling for us to leave with no deal, others are calling for another referendum and others are basically saying, “Let’s scrap the whole thing and pretend it didn’t happen.” Clearly, the petitions reflect the deep divisions in our country at the moment. There are strongly and genuinely held views right across the spectrum as to where we are and what should happen next.

It is interesting to note that the biggest petition by far, with, last time I checked, over 327,000 signatures—more than all the others put together—is the one calling for us to leave without a deal. That generally reflects what I get in my postbag. The vast majority of people, particularly of those who voted to leave, say, “On the ballot paper, it didn’t say, ‘Leave with a withdrawal agreement or a free trade deal.’ It didn’t say, ‘Leave with any strings attached.’ It simply said, ‘Leave or remain,’” and they voted to leave.

The majority of the British people—certainly, the majority of those who voted leave—simply want us to get on and do as they instructed us. If that means leaving without an agreement, that is what they want us to do. We need to understand that that is the legal position. The European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, which this House passed, states that we will leave on 29 March this year. It does not say that we will leave if we can agree a withdrawal agreement or a future trading deal. It simply says—it has established in law—that we will leave. We need to understand that. There are Members of this House who voted for that withdrawal Act but who do not seem to understand that that is what we voted for. There were no strings attached to that decision. It simply says that we will leave.

I do not want to leave without a deal. I desperately want a withdrawal agreement and a future trading arrangement that I can support and vote for. Sadly for me, the deal that the Prime Minister has agreed and

brought back to this House is not one that I can support, because I do not believe that it delivers what we promised—delivering on the referendum result. It locks our country into an untenable situation that completely undermines our ability to negotiate a future trading arrangement.

Over the last two years of negotiations, we have had things to negotiate with. Having surrendered those things to the EU, I do not understand how we think that we will get a better outcome than we have managed to get in the last two and half years. We had our £39 billion to negotiate with and we had the ability to say that we will walk away without a deal, and yet we have not made any progress. The withdrawal agreement hands those things over to the EU and leaves us hoping that we can get a decent deal out of it.

The withdrawal agreement works only if we have faith in two things: first, the goodwill of the EU towards us and, secondly, the negotiating ability of those negotiating on behalf of the UK. Given the experience of the last two years, I am sad to say, I would be absolutely foolish to have confidence in those two things—no reasonable person could. The withdrawal agreement would undermine our whole negotiating position and lock us into a situation that we were in great danger of never being able to get out of. Regrettably, I cannot support the deal.

I hope that the Prime Minister will go back to the EU, having lost the vote tomorrow. I believe that a significant loss will give a clearer message to the EU that the withdrawal agreement is completely unacceptable to Parliament, and that the EU cannot tinker at the edges or provide us with reassurances and nicely worded letters to go with it but must come up with something fundamentally far better for our country, or we will have to leave with no deal.

I know people will say that the EU has said time and again that there are no grounds for renegotiation. However, as other hon. Members have said, the EU has a good record of backing down at the last minute when it is up against a wall. I do not think we have really tested the EU’s resolve in these negotiations. Losing the vote tomorrow will give the Prime Minister the opportunity to go back and truly test the EU’s resolve. Is the EU really serious that it will not give ground and renegotiate? Is it prepared for us to walk away without a deal?

Let us be clear that leaving without a deal will involve some huge challenges, but it will not be the disaster that some predict. Time and again, we have heard the doom-mongers say that we will have no medicines and our aeroplanes will not be able to fly, but all the economic predictions have been proved wrong. I find it incredible that people are predicting the impact of Brexit in 10 years, when, in my time in politics, every six-month prediction from the Treasury has proved to be wildly wrong. It is utterly beyond me how they think they can predict 10 years ahead when they cannot get six-month predictions right.

Every scare story has been exposed as being completely untrue. Even the Mayor of Calais has made it clear that there will be no disruption to trucks coming across the English channel from Calais. I am sure that on our side of things, we will not make it more difficult for our exports to go the other way, either. Therefore, I think we can put to bed the scare stories that paint this as an utter disaster. Yes, there will be challenges, but, throughout its history, our country has shown itself to be at its

[Steve Double]

greatest when faced with challenges. I believe in the ability of the British people and British business, if there is no deal, to overcome any challenges as quickly as possible and move on to the future.

It is worth highlighting some of the other things that the petitions call for. There are petitions calling for a second referendum. I certainly do not support that. Not only would it send a hugely damaging message to the British people—that somehow the first referendum was wrong or invalid—and be hugely disrespectful to them, but I fail to see what it would achieve. The first referendum was divisive enough, but in the current climate, a second referendum would be even more divisive and damaging to our society. What will we do if leave wins again? We will have wasted our time. If there is a narrow victory for remain, do we have a third one to make it best of three? I fail to see how it would make real progress.

Over the weekend, I was thinking about today and I suddenly remembered, in the depths of my memory, that the House had actually considered this matter. On 20 December 2017, when the House was debating and voting on the withdrawal Act, an amendment was tabled calling for a second referendum on the deal. I do not know how many hon. Members remember that. Do you know, Mr Hanson, how many Members of Parliament voted for that amendment? I was quite astounded. Having listened to some of the voices from across the House, I thought it would be hundreds. It was 23. When the House had the opportunity to express its view on a second referendum, a whole 23 Members of Parliament—good on them, virtually all the Lib Dems voted for it, so at least they have been consistent—voted for one. That amendment was resoundingly defeated.

As we had the opportunity to vote for a second referendum only a year ago, I find it quite difficult to accept that so many Members of this House are now calling for one. I am not sure what has gone on during that year, but clearly something has. My line is quite simple: the House had the opportunity to vote for a second referendum, the amendment was resoundingly defeated and we should put the matter to bed. Continuing to call for a second referendum after not having voted for one at that time shows a lack of credibility.

Then there are the petitions that say that we should rescind article 50 and scrap the whole thing: “Let’s just cancel Brexit and put it in the too-difficult-to-do pile.” That, above everything, would be hugely damaging to our democracy and would send a disrespectful message to the British people. For Parliament, which voted for the referendum by a huge majority and said, “We put this decision in the hands of the British people,” to now say, “We cannot deliver it. It’s too difficult. Let’s just scrap it and call the whole thing off,” would send a wrong and damaging message to our country.

It is essential that we deliver on the referendum. I am concerned by some of the things that have been said by those, including some Conservative colleagues, who are clearly scheming and trying to find some unconstitutional technical way to overturn it and prevent Brexit. We must be honest with the British people and have integrity. All hon. Members in my party stood on a clear manifesto commitment in the last election that we would honour the referendum and deliver Brexit, so to go back on that and try to prevent it would be hugely damaging and would send all the wrong messages.

I genuinely hope that when it looks as though the vote has been lost tomorrow night, the Prime Minister goes to try to get a better deal that we can support. Let us not forget, however, that the legal position that the House voted for is that come what may—deal or no deal; withdrawal agreement or no withdrawal agreement—we will leave the European Union on 29 March. It is vital that the House delivers on that commitment.

5.51 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I am pleased to respond to the many petitions on the future of Brexit that have been submitted for our consideration. My constituency voted 71% in favour of leaving the EU in the 2016 referendum, and it still supports that decision. In fact, as Parliament has become increasingly chaotic and unable to reach a consensus, I have felt that determination to leave the EU harden among my constituents. Increasingly, correspondence from constituents makes the point that they voted to leave and that, one way or another—with a deal or without—that decision must be respected come 29 March.

My constituents who have signed the petitions have made their views equally clear. Just short of 1,000 people from Mansfield and Warsop signed the petitions in support of a clean Brexit on world trade terms, while only 150 signed the petitions in favour of a second referendum or of stopping Brexit. Nationally, as has been touched on, the biggest petition by far is the one in support of leaving on world trade terms.

Contrary to the narrative we often hear, I would argue that numbers in my constituency have, if anything, shifted more in favour of leave since 2016. Anecdotally, my experience is that those attitudes have certainly hardened. We argue in this place about precisely what “leave” meant on the ballot paper, but it did not have caveats. It said remain or leave, one way or another, not “leave subject to the EU being willing to grant us a deal.”

Parliament voted to have a referendum, and the result was to leave. Parliament voted to trigger article 50 and start the leaving process. Parliament voted for the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, which set in stone the date of our leaving as 29 March, but which did not specify that we must have a deal to leave, simply that we must leave. That remains the default legal position. It is no surprise that so many have signed petitions to show their strong feeling that that has already been decided, and that the House should respect that.

Politicians should not be debating whether we leave, whether we have another vote, or even whether we should stay in the European Union; the only question on the table is how we leave. There can be no question of going back on the Conservative and Labour parties’ 2017 manifestos, which both promised to leave the European Union and respect the result of the vote.

The hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) mentioned our TV appearance before Christmas. If I remember rightly, he was wearing a very snazzy Christmas jumper. We had a good debate, as we often do, but I struggle with his position and that of those who say no to the deal and to no deal. I wonder, in a scenario in which the European Union is clear that this might be the only deal on the table, what else is left that respects the result.

We have to decide how we leave. The deal that we will be asked to vote for tomorrow is, unfortunately, not good enough. It requires us to be part of the customs union, which would mean we continued to be bound by EU rules and regulations, over which we no longer have a say. That is not taking back control; that is worse than being in. As my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) rightly said, we cannot deliver on a vote for change by sticking as closely as possible to the status quo.

If we cannot come to an agreement on a future arrangement, which seems likely, given how the last two years have gone, we will be tied into a backstop that would make that customs union permanent, and that we could not leave without the European Union's permission. That customs union arrangement is only for Great Britain; different rules would be in place for Northern Ireland. That puts our Union under threat, allows the Scottish nationalists to further stir the pot and seek yet more referendums until they get the answer they want, and breaks the Prime Minister's promise to the people of Northern Ireland. The withdrawal agreement that we have been presented with does not fulfil the promises of the Conservative manifesto and is simply not acceptable. That is why so many of my constituents signed the petitions in favour of no deal.

We in this House all know, or can pretty much guess, that the withdrawal agreement will not pass in the House of Commons tomorrow. Some in the media have suggested a losing margin of 200 or more; I suggest that it will perhaps not be as big as that after we have gone through the confusing process of lots of amendments, which are likely to make tomorrow difficult for people out in the real world to follow. In fact, there are scenarios in which even the Government could vote against the withdrawal agreement at the end of the day, if it is amended in a way that they are not happy with. One way or another, however, the most important question is now, and always has been, what happens next. It is not about tomorrow, but plan B.

I want a deal that works, but it seems that none is forthcoming. If that is the case, I agree with my constituents who voted to leave and who expect us to leave. At no point has that been subject to us getting a deal. Although the media and many in this place like to talk about no deal, leaving on world trade terms is not no deal at all—it is hundreds of deals and transitional arrangements, both in co-operation with the EU and independently, that will make sure that we leave as smoothly as possible. Nobody wants chaos, and we will continue to work together to make sure that that does not happen.

Many constituents supported the petition because they have seen through “Project Fear”, and they appreciate the benefits of an independent Britain that will go into the future on world trade terms or with a no deal—whatever we want to call it. World trade terms have several benefits that we should relish, not least the benefit of us being a sovereign nation again, fully in control of our own affairs and able to keep some of that cash.

The withdrawal agreement promises £39 billion for a non-binding wish list of what we might like in a future relationship. I am a firm believer that we should pay our way, and that if we have signed up to projects and if there are things we want to continue to be involved in in the future, we should honour that, but of the £39 billion, only about £18 billion is for such things. Much of the

rest is for things such as EU commissioners' future pensions, which we do not need to contribute to if we are not members. As has been touched on, we have had that leverage in our pocket in the negotiations and we have not used it, and we would give it away if we signed the withdrawal agreement. A significant proportion of the money could be saved and spent on our priorities in the UK.

All hon. Members who have contributed have spoken about the problems and challenges of securing a clean break that would draw a line under the uncertainty when there is no consensus in Parliament, and when everyone has a strongly held view—for all the right reasons—but that is the only way to move on. If everyone knows where we stand and the debate is done, we can focus on the things that genuinely affect the everyday lives of citizens in this country. There is so much that we need to deal with that has been lost in the Brexit melee. The best thing for Britain is to move on.

Leaving on world trade terms would allow us the freedom to make trade deals of our own, in contrast with the withdrawal agreement, which the US, New Zealand and Australia have suggested would make that difficult. The Government are already looking at how to transfer existing deals from the EU, such as with Switzerland, to provide continuity and to ensure that we are trading on better than world trade terms with many advanced economies. In fact, we will never need to trade on world trade terms with Europe either. Article 24 of the World Trade Organisation treaty allows us to continue to trade with Europe on zero tariffs while we negotiate a free trade arrangement.

Leaving on such terms would be a change, of course—change is required whether we have a deal and the withdrawal agreement or not—but the scaremongering about the impact has been ridiculous. People have suggested that there will be queues of lorries trying to get into the UK, which will cause delays to things such as medicines coming into the country. Let us not forget that there have already been occasions when there have been such queues at Dover, because of protests in France or whatever, so we cannot pretend that EU membership has protected us from those challenges. But we should not forget that we, the UK, control who enters our country, and therefore we decide what checks are needed, not Europe. If we do not want to stop goods coming in, we can decide not to stop them coming in.

Both Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs say that no additional checks will be needed; and anyway, most physical checks are made away from the border, at source or at destination. We have the ability and flexibility to make changes, and make things work. The authorities at Calais say that they have every intention of prioritising the continued flow of goods at their port, too.

[GERAINT DAVIES *in the Chair*]

There is not time in this debate to go through all the details, but I recommend that Members read the many works on the subject by Lord Lilley in particular, which lay out the facts about WTO terms in great detail.

The important point to make is that Brexit is not Armageddon. Last night, I watched “Bird Box” on Netflix with my wife, in which strangers' voices kind of sweep in on the wind and make people kill themselves. I

[Ben Bradley]

wondered whether it might be a documentary on the impact of a no-deal Brexit, funded by Lord Adonis, Alastair Campbell or somebody along those lines.

“Bird Box” was not too dissimilar from some of the scare stories that we have heard. We have heard that super-gonorrhoea will come flying in from Europe and take us all; we have heard that babies will die because of milk shortages; and we have heard that cancer patients will die if we are not in Euratom, when Euratom does not even cover medicines at all. The level of scaremongering on this subject has been absolutely unbelievable. In fact, it has got so ridiculous that most people simply do not believe it; they discount it, and it serves only to harden the attitude that we should leave regardless.

Many people have a vested interest in whipping up that fear, but we have to deal with practical realities. We can put in place measures to make leaving with no deal, which in fact requires lots of deals, work for the UK. Preparations for that should have started earlier, absolutely; but now they are well under way.

A second referendum or revoking article 50, which are called for in some of the petitions that we are considering, would be an absolute betrayal of the trust we put in the citizens of this country to decide on this issue, and I will never support those two options.

Operating on WTO terms is not my first position, just as my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) said it was not his. I want a deal that I can support and that is the best option for the UK, but in the absence of a good deal, we still have to leave. If the Prime Minister comes back next week, after the withdrawal agreement has failed, to say that she now intends to pursue a looser free trade relationship with the EU and to try to negotiate something better in all of our interests, then, in the absence of WTO terms, that could be the back-up, but first let us try to find something better; I would absolutely support her in that.

Paul Scully: Does my hon. Friend agree that if the vote is lost and we move closer to WTO terms, or no-deal terms, or whatever people want to call it, we must move from contingency planning, which is really important, to starting to negotiate and sign bilateral agreements—that two-way thing—to alleviate some of the turbulence that we have discussed?

Ben Bradley: Absolutely, and I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He is absolutely right that we need to put in place everything we can to make this process work for the United Kingdom. That means we need to move from talking about things that we might need to do and having those contingency arrangements to getting things signed and sealed on paper, so that we can move forward, one way or the other, in the future.

However, as I say, if the Prime Minister wants to go back to Europe with a stronger hand, having seen exactly how much feeling there is against the nature of this withdrawal agreement in the Houses of Parliament, and give the European Union one last chance to come with something that we can all get behind and support for the benefit of both the UK and the European Union, then I would absolutely support her in that, and I hope that is what she will do next week. But one way or another, we have to leave.

Britain can thrive outside the European Union. No deal is very much better than the bad deal that is on offer, and I feel that increasingly my constituents are absolutely adamant—as is increasingly represented in the correspondence that I receive—that this place must support us leaving on 29 March, one way or the other.

6.3 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): It is a pleasure, Mr Davies, to serve under your chairpersonship; I think it is for the first time.

Before I get on to the subject of the debate, I will make two points about the manner in which we are discussing it. First, a great many people have taken the time and trouble to read and sign the various petitions, and Parliament has previously said that it is very respectful and supportive of people petitioning this institution; and yet today, to consider a topic that has gripped the country, during what can only be regarded as a political crisis that has no end in sight, only nine Members of Parliament have turned up.

I know why that is so: the main event is still happening only 100 metres away. However, it is not the first time that this has happened. I remember a very similar occasion before Christmas when I was here to respond from the third party to a petition about Brexit while a big Brexit discussion was going on in the main Chamber.

I do not say that to criticise; I am merely making an observation. I say as gently as possible to the Petitions Committee, the Panel of Chairs and the Clerks of the House that we know that this is not a topic that will go away; it will dominate our politics at least throughout the next year. We know that Parliament sits at 2.30 pm on a Monday; we know that after a weekend of not sitting, there are likely to be statements; and we know that any significant event in this process is likely to happen on a Monday afternoon. If, in the months to come, we receive further petitions relating to Brexit, I ask that we do not schedule debates on them on a Monday afternoon—

Paul Scully: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tommy Sheppard: I will take an intervention, but I am really trying not to be divisive or critical; I am simply asking the Petitions Committee at least to give consideration to a different schedule.

Paul Scully: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I just wanted to explain that 4.30 pm on a Monday is the slot that is allocated every week, so there is not a lot of scope for flexibility. The Petitions Committee meets in private, but one of the questions that we often ask about Brexit petitions is whether, because we debate the matter so often in the House, we are just duplicating debates. We try to give people a voice as much as we can, but I take his point.

Tommy Sheppard: I understand that. The same is true of the Backbench Business Committee, which has no control over when it can schedule debates; it has to work within times that are given to it. Nevertheless, I am raising this issue so that the Petitions Committee might consider it and make representations to whoever is in control of the schedule, to point out the problems that we are having. We can make jokes about it, but if

this continues I think there will come a point when the public ask, “Are these petitions really being taken seriously enough by Members of Parliament?”

My second point is not a major one, but I am not sure about the efficacy of lumping petitions together in a one for consideration. I know that it would take more time if we did not do that. However, although the petitions that we are discussing appear to be alternatives to each other, we cannot necessarily test the pros and cons of each by reference to people who have petitioned on a completely different matter. I think we ought not to aggregate such matters. We should not simply make the assumption that anybody who signs a petition about Brexit will be happy and content to have their concerns considered in conjunction with those of anybody else who signs a petition about Brexit, which may come from a completely different perspective.

I will move on to the substance of the debate. I am against Brexit, my party is against Brexit and Scotland voted against Brexit, so I think people know where I stand. I am not into “Project Fear”; I had enough of “Project Fear” in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. I do not suggest that the world will end if Brexit goes ahead on 29 March. In fact, I do not even think that it will be that big a historical event, apart from the significance of the date, in terms of what materially happens.

I think that the most horrible thing about this process is that we will enter a process of slow, insidious grinding down of living standards, and with that will come a grinding down of the hope and optimism of the country and a fuelling of many of the sentiments that led to the vote in 2016. My concern is that we are about to commit a degree of national self-harm that we could avoid; it is entirely self-inflicted.

Having said that, all that we can summate from the petitions that we are considering today is that opinion is divided. The big question now: what are we going to do to take this process forward, knowing that the country is divided, knowing that Parliament is divided and knowing that it is very, very difficult to try to chart a course through?

I turn to the question of whether there should be another referendum on the question. I do not think that we should put the same question again, but I do think that there are circumstances in which it is legitimate to go back to the people and consult them further. We cannot do so every day, but in a democracy people have the right to change their minds. Particularly when one decision has created a process and led to things that were not anticipated, people have the right to be consulted again.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman referred to optimism, and the optimism of the 17.4 million people who voted to leave cannot be ignored. I respect his comments. He and I probably disagree on many things, including this issue, but does he not agree that a second referendum would, by its very nature, be divisive and, unfortunately, engineer more disquiet and anger among the people by totally ignoring the referendum of June 2016, when 17.4 million people said, “We want to leave”? Let us honour that.

Tommy Sheppard: The hon. Gentleman has pre-empted me. I will come on to those precise points, so bear with me.

In a democracy, people have the right to change their minds, but we cannot provide procedures for them to do that every day, every week, every month or even every year. There are, however, circumstances in which it is legitimate to revisit the question. I would set three tests. The first is: has the information on which the original decision was made changed significantly? In this case, it has. Far more information is available now than was available three years ago, and some of the promises that were made appear, even to those who proposed them, not to be possible to deliver. Secondly, have people changed their mind on the subject by an extent significant enough to suggest that the result would be different were the question asked again? Thirdly, has the legislature—the Parliament—that is charged with the responsibility of executing the decision of a referendum proved unwilling or unable to do so? I contend that the first two of those tests have been met and the third will be met tomorrow night, when the Government’s proposal crashes and burns.

Steve Double: I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman. I am interested to know the basis for his second point, which is about people changing their minds. If it is opinion polls, we all know that over the past few years opinion polls have been very wrong—those on the referendum predicted a win for remain. Surely, therefore, we cannot trust opinion polls as evidence that people have changed their mind.

Tommy Sheppard: I do not know about trusting opinion polls, but they are clearly evidence that people have changed their mind. Yes, 17.4 million people voted in a certain way three years ago, but the aggregate of opinion polls suggests that a significant number of them have changed their mind. We have ignored, up to now, the 48% who did not go along with the proposition, and we are in danger of not only continuing to ignore them but denying the possibility that people might have changed their minds, and ignoring the fact that they have.

Jim Shannon: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Tommy Sheppard: I will give way one more time, but I am anxious not to labour the point for long.

Jim Shannon: In my constituency, people voted 56% to 44% to leave. Over the holiday period, I made it my business to talk to my constituents in fishing, farming, business and ordinary life, and opinion is hardening in relation to leaving the EU. That is happening in my constituency, and I am sure it is happening in others.

Tommy Sheppard: I have no reason to gainsay what the hon. Gentleman says about his constituency. Likewise, in my constituency the direction is the other way. Current polling in Scotland suggests that while 62% voted to remain three years ago, if the vote were held today the figure would probably be more than 70%. That can be played either way.

The point is that not only is public opinion fundamentally divided, but there is a churn in that opinion and people are anxious to discuss and to be consulted on the matter again. Some of the arguments that have been made against that are disturbing. Over the weekend, for example, the Prime Minister said that it was ridiculous for people

[Tommy Sheppard]

to ask for a second vote, and that if the UK Parliament overturned a referendum result in Wales or Scotland, people would be outraged. Of course, it was quickly pointed out that she had voted in this Parliament to overturn the referendum result in Wales, but my concern is about Scotland.

The Prime Minister's comparison is a false one, because the 2014 vote in Scotland was to secede from the United Kingdom. Asking what would happen if the United Kingdom Parliament were to overturn the vote of the Scottish electorate is no comparison at all. The comparison would be to ask, "What would it be like if people had voted in a UK-wide referendum to leave the European Union and the EU then decided that they couldn't?" No one would suggest that that was in any way—[*Interruption.*] Hon. Members may laugh, but no one surely suggests that the EU is either trying, or has the legal ability, to prevent the United Kingdom from leaving.

Steve Double: Clearly, the EU has no legal right to do that, but I am sure the hon. Gentleman would agree that it is trying every trick in the book to make it as difficult as possible for us to leave, partly because, as the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) said, it wants to make an example of us to ensure that no one else dares vote to leave.

Tommy Sheppard: As the hon. Gentleman says, the EU has absolutely no right to do that. It may be concerned about agreeing to certain aspects of the nature of the United Kingdom's withdrawal, but it has no right to prevent the withdrawal. To suggest that it does is disingenuous.

I am slightly concerned about another thing. People have talked, including here today, about Parliament overturning the will of the people. I ask hon. Members to please consider that language, because it is not particularly helpful. No one is suggesting that Parliament should vote to disregard and overturn the result of the 2016 referendum—[*Interruption.*] The Minister chunters at me from a sedentary position. Okay, perhaps I cannot say "no one", but I do not suggest that and neither does my party. I have not heard anyone in this Chamber suggest that Parliament should vote to overturn the decision of the 2016 referendum. What people are arguing about is whether the people who took the decision to leave the EU should be consulted on whether, knowing what they do now, they wish to continue with that decision.

That brings me to what the question on the ballot paper would be, about which there has been some discussion. As I see it, and I am trying to be logical, in June 2016 the people of the United Kingdom voted to start a process. They said, "This is the direction we want to go in. We want to leave the EU and we want the Government to go ahead and do that." I have many criticisms about how the Government of the day did that, but I cannot claim that they did not engage and commit resources and time to trying to discharge that mandate.

Two and half years later, the Government have got to a position with a deal on the table—let us not even call it a deal; the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) is right. There is a set of proposals

about how that 2016 mandate could be implemented, and how it should be discharged and executed. The question is: are those proposals acceptable to the people who commissioned the process in the first place? Is this really what they want to do? They should be given the choice of whether to go ahead or call a halt to the process, in which case the status quo ante would pertain and we would remain in the EU. Those are the two broad choices.

Ben Bradley: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tommy Sheppard: I will take the intervention, because I think I can guess what the hon. Gentleman will say.

Ben Bradley: Does the hon. Gentleman not see the problem in presenting a deal that a petition of 300,000-odd people say is not Brexit, and that Conservative Members have today said does not represent Brexit? Having "Brexit" on a ballot paper does not give anyone an educated choice about what they are voting on.

Tommy Sheppard: But it is Brexit. It may not be the type of Brexit the hon. Gentleman wants—it may not be as hard and quick as he wants—but it is the United Kingdom leaving the EU. The Minister will perhaps confirm that when he makes his statement. I am pretty sure that what we will be voting on tomorrow night is a form of Brexit.

My point is that after two and a half years of intense discussion, argument, negotiation and research, the Government say that this is the best they can come up with. I think it is pretty shoddy and I shall vote against it, but I do not dispute the fact that it probably is the best they can come up with, so that is it. I say to the people who wanted this to happen, "This is what it looks like. Do you want it to happen, or do you not?" That is the question that people should be given.

People have said, "It is impossible to do that by 29 March." Of course it is. Everyone accepts it is impossible to have another referendum by 29 March. That is why the obvious decision for Parliament would be to say, "We want to go back and consult the people, and we wish the European Union to allow an extension of the article 50 process in order for that to happen." I cannot conceive of a situation in which the European Union would not, in those circumstances, consent to a three or six-month extension of article 50—however long it would take—to organise a plebiscite and ask people whether they are really sure that they want to go ahead with Brexit. The European Union has said that it would not countenance an extension of article 50 if the proposal were not changed, but the whole purpose of seeking an extension would be to offer the possibility of changing the proposition. I cannot believe that the European Union would deny the United Kingdom the opportunity to do that; in fact, if it did, I would call foul on the European Union, and I might even change my mind about what our relationship should be, so convinced am I that the EU would not take that position.

Some of the language that has been used in this debate is potentially very dangerous. People have suggested, for example, that we cannot possibly allow people to vote on this question again because if the result went a different way, it would not just be divisive, but the people who lose might go out on to the streets, there might be political violence and the far right in this

country might increase, taking us back to scenes that we saw in the 1970s, when I first came into politics. However, that will only happen if we tell people that they are being excluded from the decision. If we make it clear that the reason for a people's vote or another referendum is to include people and involve them all in the decision, I do not see why that should happen; if it did happen, it would be an illegitimate response to any decision that might be taken. I am assuming, of course, that a people's vote would lead to a change in position, but it might not. In that case, I really think it is better that people get the chance to make absolutely sure that they want to go ahead with the process, with all its potential difficulties.

I turn to the position of the Labour party, and I would like the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) to clarify something. My understanding is that the party's position, as several Labour Members have said, is that there should be a general election. Now, we are not going to get a two-thirds majority, but the obvious route to a general election is to place before the House a motion of no confidence in the Government. I ask the shadow Minister when, or in what circumstances, that is going to happen. Will it happen when the Government are defeated tomorrow night? Will it happen after the Labour party has given the Government another three days to come back with plan B—of course, we decided on that last week—or will it never happen unless the Labour party is convinced that it knows the result, because it does not want to table a motion of no confidence and be defeated? As much as we need to get over tomorrow night's decision before we can move forward, we also need to get over the no-confidence question before Parliament and the country can move forward.

The leader of the Labour party seems to have been hardening his position in recent days. He has said that were there to be a general election, he would put in the Labour manifesto a commitment to implement the result of the 2016 European Union referendum—in other words, to proceed with Brexit. Perhaps the shadow Minister could clarify whether that is the case. If so, it seems to me that Labour would be in the position of calling a general election on the question of Brexit without offering people the option of stopping Brexit. I think that would lead to political disillusionment on a scale far greater than that which might be caused by another people's vote. It would be helpful to have some clarification, because as far as I am concerned, a choice between the Prime Minister's Brexit and the Leader of the Opposition's Brexit is not really a choice at all.

I will finish by referencing the situation in Scotland, because we have been trying very hard to play a constructive role in this debate. As I say, we have our mandate: 74% of my constituents told me they did not want to leave the European Union, and that figure is probably now closer to 80%. Some 97% of the thousands of people who write to me about this issue are against going ahead with Brexit, so I am quite clear, but I am not saying, "Stop it now." For two and a half years now, we have tried to engage in this Parliament, and the Scottish Government have put forward compromise proposals. However, those proposals have been rejected time and time again, because the manner in which this has been gone about has been an object lesson in how not to do politics.

Last week, the Prime Minister had a cross-party meeting with Back-Bench MPs, which I attended. As the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) pointed out, it was a welcome event; it was just a shame that it had not been done two and a half years ago when the vote was initially taken. It really was a case of too little, too late. However, I ask the Minister to clarify whether, in the event of a defeat tomorrow night, the Government—given that they are no longer able to get their own position through the House—will consider working on a cross-party basis and consulting with Members from different parties and with different views, in order to see whether it is possible to reach a consensual and agreed way forward. At the minute, Scotland is involved in trying to stop Brexit—to create a situation in which the UK does not leave the EU—because it is in the interests of the people we represent, as well as the people of all the UK. However, if our voices continue to be ignored, then we have an alternative, and it will be activated once this Brexit dust settles.

6.26 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to wind up the debate for the Opposition with you in the Chair, Mr Davies; I am sure you will deeply regret having missed many of the contributions made earlier in the debate, knowing your views on these matters. I thank the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) for the way in which he opened the debate—he drew on points made by petitioners on both sides of the argument and on different proposals—and for the way in which he explored the complexity of the issues that we face. In that context, I draw attention to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris): the tone of our discussions is so important, particularly given some of the stuff we have seen around the precincts of Westminster over the past week. He was right to say that we are at a crossroads. People are expressing wildly diverse but sincerely held views; the reasons why people voted as they did in the 2016 referendum were sincere, too. We should respect all those views.

The petitions we have debated reflect the divisions in the country, and indeed in Parliament—divisions that have been exacerbated, not healed, by the way in which this Government have approached the negotiations over the past two years. It did not have to be like this. When the negotiations began, we urged the Prime Minister to look beyond the war in her own party, and to reach out to the majority in Parliament and across the country who respected the fact that the people had voted to leave—the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) and my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) are right about that—but also accepted that they had done so by a painfully close margin. We urged the Prime Minister to recognise the vote for what it was: a mandate to end our membership of the European Union, but not to rupture our relationship with our closest neighbours, our key allies and our most important trading partner, and certainly not to crash out of the European Union without any agreement.

The hon. Members for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) and for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns), in disagreeing with the deal, both said that it was the only deal that would be countenanced by the European Union—that, in the words of the Prime Minister, it was the only deal

[Paul Blomfield]

possible, a point that I am sure the Minister will make. But it was the only deal possible within the constraints that the Prime Minister had set herself. The European Union made it clear that there were a range of options and relationships that it was prepared to consider, but the British Government had effectively ruled those out with the negotiating terms that they had set. We regret the fact that the Prime Minister allowed the agenda to be set by what her own Chancellor described as the Brexit “extremists” within her party. She set the red line, boxed herself in and ended up pleasing nobody—neither leave nor remain voters—with the deal.

In December, with the clock ticking, the Prime Minister wasted a further month by delaying the vote on the deal that is doomed to fall tomorrow. So what is her strategy now to get the deal through? Threatening MPs and the country with no deal at all. We have made it clear from the start that we would not accept a blackmail Brexit: the choice of “My deal or no deal.” We will reject her deal tomorrow, confident that Parliament will not allow the country to leave without a deal; that is the clearly expressed view of the majority of Members of Parliament. As the Chancellor of the Exchequer has made clear, leaving without a deal would be a “terrible” outcome for the UK economy. He compared it with the dark days of the 1980s.

It is not enough to talk about doom merchants or the car industry “bleating”. I say to the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay that the stories about stockpiling medicines were not scare stories run by doom merchants. They were the proposals made by the Government in the preparatory papers that those supporting Brexit had urged them to prepare to ensure the country was ready for no deal. It was the Government who said we needed to stockpile medicines and food, and who said they could not continue to guarantee the power supply in Northern Ireland. That is their assessment of the position in relation to no deal.

We should recognise that the voices warning against no deal do not simply come from partisans within this place. They come from the CBI, the Engineering Employers Federation, the British Chamber of Commerce and the TUC—those who are at the coalface of the consequences if we leave with no deal. I have heard it said in this debate, and it is strongly argued by many, that if we leave without a deal, we should reclaim the £39 billion that we are to hand to the EU. Many of the people who make that argument also argue that we should strike out to secure new trade deals with many other countries around the world. The Chancellor was right to ask what country would sign up to a deal with a country that has demonstrated its ability to renege on agreements properly made in good faith.

Graham Stringer: We agree on tomorrow’s vote, but disagree on the objectives. I assume we agree that we all should follow the law. Does my hon. Friend not accept the view of the House of Lords Committee about where our legal obligations start and finish? We do not have a legal obligation to pay £39 billion, and the basis of trade deals is to follow the rules and the law.

Paul Blomfield: I obviously agree with my hon. Friend that we should follow the law; there would not be much purpose to this place if we did not accept that premise.

The House of Lords Committee expressed an opinion. There are different opinions. I would probably accept that we do not need to pay all of that £39 billion. There are different views, and the hon. Member for Mansfield differentiated between some of them, but reneging on the entire £39 billion, as some Brexit extremists suggest we should, would put us in contravention of agreements.

Steve Double: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, in the EU’s own words, nothing is agreed until everything is agreed? On that basis, we have not yet agreed to the £39 billion. We are not reneging on anything if we cannot come to an agreement with the EU.

Paul Blomfield: The hon. Gentleman knows that it was the last but one Brexit Secretary, himself an opponent of the Prime Minister’s deal, who agreed to the sequencing of the decisions, and who signed up to the £39 billion question.

I will move on to another aspect of the no-deal argument. It is important, because those who advocate no deal have said, “If we leave with no deal, it’s easy; we will just slip out on WTO terms. No problem at all.” I highlight the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North, which echoed what the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam said in his opening remarks: WTO terms cover only a part of our relationship. They do not, for example, cover the critical relationships relating to security and the protection of this country in fighting crime and terrorism.

Even with regard to our trading relationship, there was a suggestion that we could slip into WTO terms easily, seamlessly, and without process, and that those terms are the default position for every member of the WTO. But there is not a member of the WTO that does not have additional trade agreements above and beyond those terms. Our current agreements with some 70 countries are through our membership of the European Union. They were negotiated bilaterally. It is worth noting that some time ago, when the Government’s White Paper talked about expanding our markets around the world, the Government rightly cited South Korea as an example. There have been huge developments in UK trade with South Korea since the EU signed a bilateral trade deal with South Korea.

Those arguing for an easy process have suggested that it will be simple to roll over the agreements in the brave new world, but they have already had to confront the harsh truth that some 20 countries, including allies whom they regularly point to—the United States, Australia and New Zealand—have objected to our simply rolling over agreements because they see an opportunity to gain a commercial advantage. I do not blame them; we would probably do the same in a different situation. The process of simply slipping into the WTO in the way that has been suggested bears no relation to the real situation.

I understand why the idea of no deal has gained in popularity; it is partly because it is a simple and straightforward proposition, but it is partly and very significantly the fault of the Prime Minister. She launched the meaningless mantra of “no deal is better than a bad deal” way back in January 2017 at Lancaster House, and she and members of the Government have repeated it endlessly. No wonder people think no deal is a viable option. She justified it by saying, “We would...be able to trade with Europe. We would be free to strike trade deals across the world.”

However, she failed to make it clear that no deal does not mean the status quo. In that sense, it is not like buying a house, which is how the former Brexit Secretary described it—as someone walking away, after a deal breaks down, with no less advantage than when they entered the negotiations. Walking away in the context of no deal means substantially damaging our position. Yes, it would mean in theory that we had the ability to trade with the EU, but not on the same terms as we currently do. The terms of seamless trade that countless supply chains and just-in-time production rely on would disappear.

Back then, the Prime Minister was happy to suggest that nothing would change in our trade relationship with Europe, but the truth is now out, and she has turned her own slogan on its head. She is now desperately going around the country, and within Parliament, saying that we have to accept her doomed deal because the alternative is no deal. She says that no deal would be a disaster. On that, at least, she is right, but the country deserves better than a choice between shrinking the economy by 4% under her deal and by 8% under no deal.

Clearly, we are in unprecedented times. The hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay said that the EU27 were trying to frustrate the process. What has frustrated the process more than anything has been the Government's inability to agree their own position. I have spent some time talking with politicians from across the political spectrum and across nations within the EU27. Time and again they have said, "We're sorry that the UK has chosen to leave the European Union. We wish you weren't leaving, but we recognise that you are. We would simply like to be able to negotiate with certainty, knowing what your country wants; and once there was agreement, we would like your Prime Minister to be able to deliver on that, even just within the framework of her own party." The war within that party has held back the negotiations more than any other factor.

It is pretty clear that the deal will be defeated tomorrow, but what then? The House has made it clear, against the Government's opposition, that the Prime Minister will have to return within three days with plan B, and cannot try to run the clock down any further. Governments who can no longer govern do not have a place. That is why we are calling for a general election. I will come to the point made by the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard).

This is the central issue of our time. It is certainly the central issue of this Parliament. The Government have spent two years focused on it above everything. It has caused paralysis in other critical areas of economic and social policy. All the Government's energies have been focused on the deal, so if that deal is defeated tomorrow, the honourable thing—the right thing, and the thing that would have happened in years gone by—would be for the Government to step down. Owing to the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, it is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton pointed out, more complex. After the deal is defeated we will therefore, without wasting time, seek to move a vote of no confidence in the Government.

If the Government run scared from facing the voters, and I understand why they might after last June—

Tommy Sheppard: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Paul Blomfield: I will.

Tommy Sheppard: May I ask for a little more clarity? The hon. Gentleman says that if the deal is rejected, Labour will seek a vote at some point. Will he give us an indication of the Front-Bench thinking on that? Crucially, would Labour give the Government time to present a plan B before it made a decision on a no-confidence vote?

Paul Blomfield: I anticipated that intervention, and the hon. Gentleman will anticipate my response. I said that we would waste no time. I am not going to share with him exactly the way in which that decision will unfold.

I hope that Government Members might recognise at that point that a general election would be a way of resolving the issue, but I recognise that they might not, after their experience last June. I say to those who have signed petitions for a second referendum—we have debated similar petitions previously, and at much greater length—that at that point, if there is to be a general election, we will look at all the options available, including a further referendum.

In that context, it is profoundly irresponsible of the Prime Minister to go around the country rallying the people against Parliament, for the Foreign Secretary to attack the Speaker of the House of Commons in the way that he did on Friday, or for the Transport Secretary to say that if the Prime Minister's deal is not accepted it will lead to a

"less tolerant society, a more nationalistic nation...open...to extremist populist political forces".

Their efforts would have been better spent condemning those who are driving intolerance within our politics, and presenting a united front against that sort of extremism. Briefings to the Sunday papers about a coup in Parliament are clearly intended to set voters against MPs, but we in this place should not allow Parliament to be intimidated.

The truth is that there are no easy choices facing us over the next few weeks, and there are probably no good outcomes. We have to make the best of where we are. Those are the difficulties that Parliament is grappling with. We need calm heads. We should not be ramping up the rhetoric, but should recognise the consequences of all the choices that we face. That is what the Opposition are committed to doing, in the interests of all the people we represent.

6.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Kwasi Kwarteng): I said to myself, I think about halfway through the debate, that I would keep my remarks brief, because we have had an extensive debate, we have had excellent speeches, and frankly we have rehearsed many of these points—

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): May I say that you have only 45 minutes?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am fully aware of the timescale. You are lucky, Mr Davies, that my hour-long speech will have to be curtailed. I wanted to make brief remarks because many of these points have been rehearsed at length in debates gone by, and I am sure that they will be in the future.

[Kwasi Kwarteng]

I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) introduced the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. He read out the petitions and the views of hundreds of thousands of people. It was striking, as he pointed out, that all those viewpoints were, essentially, contradictory. There is a full and wide range of opinion in the country—as evidenced by the petitions—as there are divergent views in the House of Commons. In the Chamber today, with only about nine MPs, we have a wide range of views. We have people who support Brexit but do not like the deal, people who support Brexit but do like the deal, and people who do not like the deal and do not like Brexit. The permutations seem endless, and that is with only nine MPs.

I want to make it clear that that degree of divergence in view—the very different opinions expressed right across the country—shows the level of confusion that there might well be if this exercise of Brexit is not concluded in an orderly fashion. As one would expect, my view, and that of the Government, is that the best way of delivering Brexit in a timely, orderly manner is through the deal in the withdrawal agreement. It is not true to say that it does not deliver Brexit. That is a grotesque exaggeration and caricature of the deal.

I fought very hard alongside many MPs, some of whom are in the Chamber, for Brexit in 2016. I was very clear about the three things that I wanted from Brexit. I wanted to see a drastic curtailment, if not an end, to the club membership—the £10 billion net a year that we were paying indefinitely, and that would have increased as we entered a new budget period. The deal completely prevents that. There is no £39 billion figure in the agreement. That is a snapshot, or a shorthand expression.

It is a lot of money, but it actually equates to only four years of net payments. We were in the EU, or the European Economic Community, for 46 years. Everyone understands that to leave such a commitment—to leave that union after such a long period of membership—will take time. The deal recognises that. It curtails the length of the implementation period. It curtails the money. The £39 billion figure is often quoted, but that is against £10 billion every year from today until kingdom come.

Importantly, one of the big issues in the Brexit referendum was freedom of movement from the EU. Many people, particularly among ethnic minority communities, were saying, “How is it that someone from the EU who speaks no English at all can come to Britain without a job, while my relatives from Commonwealth countries outside the EU do not have that opportunity?” Many others in my constituency, including builders and people working in construction, also mentioned freedom of movement. I remember coming out of Staines station and meeting someone who said that he would vote for Brexit because he had not had a wage increase for 15 years. A clever economist might say that that was simplistic, but that was the view—that was how people felt that their professional experience was developing. Freedom of movement was a big issue.

The withdrawal agreement—the deal that we need to vote on—is not perfect; like any deal in history, it includes some give and take. However, it substantially delivers on putting an end to freedom of movement, and that is why we are introducing an immigration Bill.

As I recall, the third big issue in the campaign was about the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice: would it continue to be sovereign over this Parliament? On that issue, too, the withdrawal agreement delivers. It is a good deal, and it largely delivers on what we campaigned for as Brexiteers.

I say to my Brexit colleagues, as the Prime Minister said in her speech today in Stoke, that there is a marked and strong current of opinion in the House of Commons that wants to subvert or reverse Brexit. I know that those are strong words, and people will say, “Oh, we just want to scrutinise legislation.” Forget all that—it is clear to a child that there are MPs in this House who want to reverse the referendum. They have openly said that the referendum result was a disaster and have pledged to overturn it, but they know that the only way that they can do that is by means of a second referendum. It is not that they like the idea of a second referendum because they want to test the robustness of the decision or celebrate the exercise of democracy, but that the way to reverse Brexit is very clear: it has to be done through a second referendum, to give it the authority that the first had. I do not know about our Scottish National party friends, but it would take a very bold remainder to say that the House of Commons could simply unilaterally disregard the referendum.

If one wants to stay in the EU, one has to accept that the only way of doing so is with a second referendum. Hon. Members who sit on the Conservative Benches or who represent leave constituencies have detected a hardening of public opinion, however. As a Member who represents a leave constituency, I concur: even if a second referendum took place, I do not believe that the remainers would get their wish. Nevertheless, I fully understand that that is their only shot—their only conduit to reversing something that they think is a disaster—so it is the route they want to pursue. The Government’s view is that that would be wholly disruptive, divisive and simply a cheat, because it would be an attempt to circumvent the decision.

The vast majority of Members of this House voted to have the referendum, voted to trigger article 50 and voted to pass the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. Let us be under no illusions: the debate on a second referendum is simply about trying to reverse the result of the first. The Government simply cannot accept that. We want to move forward and conclude Brexit in an orderly and managed fashion—I was almost going to say an elegant fashion, but I think that that would be pushing things too far.

Tommy Sheppard: If the Minister is so convinced that he and the Brexiteers, as he calls them, would win a second referendum, why is he so scared of letting the people have a say?

Kwasi Kwarteng: What was interesting about the hon. Gentleman’s speech was that about halfway through it, I realised I had heard it all in a speech he gave before Christmas. It was eloquent and well put, but I have heard all the arguments before.

I am not scared of a second referendum; I am simply trying to focus people’s minds on what it means. It is being proposed not by great exponents of democracy or champions of the people’s voice, but almost exclusively by people who are on the record as saying that the first referendum result was a disaster, that they want to reverse it and that they fully accept that the only way of

getting their cherished aim of staying in the EU is with a second referendum. I reject that approach because it tries to subvert the result of the 2016 referendum. We can pretend that it is a wonderful exercise of democracy, but it is not; it is trying to go against the clear and decisive vote of the people in 2016.

The hon. Gentleman says that opinion polls have changed, but they have not changed that much. And as my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) points out, they are the very opinion polls that said the day before the 2016 referendum that remain would win by 10 points, and that got things consistently wrong throughout the whole referendum campaign. I do not believe that the second premise of the argument made by the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard)—that somehow there has been a marked shift in public opinion—should precipitate a referendum.

Graham Stringer: I agree completely with the Minister's point about the motivation for a second referendum, but some of the people who want to subvert the 2016 referendum result have another string to their bow: attrition. By extending article 50, they want to extend the whole process until the House or the public should get weary of it. Will the Minister give us an assurance that under no circumstances will the Government introduce a statutory instrument that changes the date for leaving the European Union that was set in the European Union (Withdrawal) Act?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise that issue. My understanding is that the Government will not seek to extend article 50. That is the Government's view, but in the light of what happened last week and the fact that we are hearing stories about a potential motion of the House to overturn Standing Order No. 14, it may well be that the House will take a collective view. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), said something to the effect that the House would not countenance no deal—I may be quoting him loosely. That means that the House would take it upon itself to introduce legislation or a motion to bind or strongly encourage the Government to extend article 50.

I know the Government's position, but given that last week, extraordinarily to me, the amendment of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) was made and was allowed to be made, who knows what will happen? The Prime Minister is quite right to suggest—indeed, it is a statement of fact—that Brexit itself is in danger.

If the House votes down the deal tomorrow, we will have about two and a half months. The House may take it upon itself to stop no deal; I suggest to the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) that enough MPs have said publicly that under no circumstances will they countenance no deal. Those people will not simply sit on their hands watching the sand running down the egg-timer until no deal happens on 29 March. They are bright people, skilled in parliamentary debate and procedure, and they will do all they can to frustrate no deal—they have pretty much said that, and their actions have shown it. I feel that a lot of my Brexiteer colleagues are showing remarkable complacency in thinking that all we have to do is sit and wait for no deal to take place. What I am saying is that nobody knows.

I think that the best, clearest, most elegant and simplest way of delivering Brexit is simply to vote for the deal. The deal is not perfect—no deal is perfect—but it takes us forward to the second stage of negotiations with the EU. It means that we leave the EU, as the hon. Member for Edinburgh East suggested. He is honest: he says he does not want to leave the EU, which is why he will vote against the deal. It is extraordinary for Brexiteer colleagues to say that they want Brexit but will vote down the deal by marching through the Lobby with people whose sole political aim is to frustrate Brexit. Members who advocate Brexit will, metaphorically, link arm in arm with people who want to frustrate the whole project. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield and my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) have radically different views on the nature of Brexit, its purpose and its good effects, as she and I see them, but they will probably go through the same Lobby. Frankly, this is a crazy situation.

Andrea Jenkyns: The reason we are likely to go through the same Lobby is, quite frankly, because the Government have failed to listen time and again. Behind closed doors we have all been having meetings with the Whip and the Prime Minister and expressing our concerns for months, but they have fallen on deaf ears. With respect, it is no wonder that we are in this situation, because the Government have put a bad deal to the House.

Kwasi Kwarteng: That illustrates exactly what I was going to say—in a funny way, it actually makes my argument for me. Two groups of people who think diametrically opposed things have come together to vote down the deal. One group thinks that by voting down the deal it will get to stay in the EU; another thinks that by voting down the deal it will get a perfect Brexit. Both groups cannot be right. They are rational, intelligent people on both sides, yet they think diametrically opposed things will happen, which suggests to me that the deal is probably the best way forward. The unholy alliance between principled Brexiteers—many are close friends of mine, whom I respect—and people who have openly said that they would vote down Brexit shows me very clearly that the deal is the only rational and sensible way forward.

Andrea Jenkyns: It takes a lot for somebody who has always been loyal to the party over the past decade or so—and since I have been a Member—to vote against the Government. I have never done so, like many of my colleagues who have resigned as Parliamentary Private Secretaries. Let us not forget that it is the remain colleagues in our party who have been thwarting Brexit and who have voted against the Government so far. To return to my previous point, you have not provided the House with a deal that actually represents Brexit. So many constituents have written to me to say, “Please vote that deal down.” It is you, the Government and the Prime Minister who have done the job of uniting Conservative Members against your deal.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Just to clarify, obviously it is not me.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I urge the hon. Lady and her Brexiteer colleagues to vote for the deal. I am not speaking as a Government Minister but as a Brexiteer, and my real worry is that Brexit will be abandoned because the Brexiteers are divided.

[*Kwasi Kwarteng*]

I am a historian and someone who loves reading about history. There are countless examples of situations where people have won what they were fighting for and then simply fallen out—there have been divisions. That is a very grave danger for Brexit: having won the argument and the referendum in 2016, we see the Brexit side quite fractured. As a Brexiteer, I support the deal. My hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam, as a Brexiteer, supports the deal. Yet there are other Brexiteers here in Westminster Hall, not to mention in the wider House of Commons, who support Brexit but feel that they cannot support the deal. I urge all Brexiteers, and remainers who want to see their manifesto commitments fulfilled—the entire Labour party, according to its manifesto—to vote for the deal in order to move forward. Any other outcome, as a result of voting down the deal, would add to the chaos and confusion, and it would imperil Brexit.

Thank you very much for your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank all hon. Members for their excellent contributions to this very high-quality debate.

7.5 pm

Paul Scully: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the second half of the debate, Mr Davies. I thank the Minister for his excellent speech, and I thank everybody for their interesting and informative contributions, which have been made in such a constructive, passionate and respectful way. We have had a lot of passion running high around the country and there has been harassment and bullying from both sides. My right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), my hon. Friends the Members for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) and for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) and others have suffered harassment, bullying and worse. It is possible to engage constructively, passionately and respectfully with people with polar opposite views.

When I was on platforms arguing for Brexit, people said to me, “Well, what does your Brexit look like?” I would say, “Actually, I can tell you what mine looks like,

but that precludes you from having any say in it whatsoever if that’s how it’s going to be. We need to debate this and discuss it.” A number of people said, “Well, if only it was like the Common Market rather than the extra bits we have had over the last 20 years.” Ironically, the original Chequers White Paper was closer to the Common Market. It is important to remember that this deal is not even Chequers—a lot of that comes in the second half of the negotiations.

We know that a referendum is unlikely to resolve anything. We cannot agree on the question, the timetable or even how we would approach it in this place, so I cannot see how a referendum would work. Revoking article 50 because people find Brexit too difficult—they put it in the “too difficult” box—is not something that people will live with in this country. The thing that has saddened me in this House over the past couple of years is its paucity of ambition for our country to take what will be good about Brexit, whether that be reclaiming control or future trading arrangements. We know there will be difficulties to get to that place in the next few months, but I am confident and optimistic that we can do that. The Minister was absolutely right to say that there are two sides and one is going to be wrong: it will lose, and what happens will be the diametric opposite of what they want.

I will not be a heroic loser. If I am wrong and have blinked too early, I will be the first to shake hands with my colleagues who have spoken. I want to ensure that we leave the EU in an orderly fashion, and I thank everyone again.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the House has considered e-petitions 229963, 221747 and 235185 relating to leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement, 232984 and 231461 relating to holding a further referendum on leaving the EU, and 226509 and 236261 relating to not leaving the EU.

7.8 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 14 January 2019

DEFENCE

National Shipbuilding Strategy

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): As stated in the National Shipbuilding Strategy, Sir John Parker has agreed to review the progress that has been made on implementation. I am pleased to announce that Sir John has begun the review process and will report to the Secretary of State for Defence by the summer.

[HCWS1246]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Clean Air Strategy

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): Today, the Government published their ambitious Clean Air Strategy, building upon an extensive consultation process last year.

Air pollution is the UK's top environmental risk to human health, ranking alongside cancer, heart disease and obesity in its impact. It causes more harm than passive smoking. The actions outlined in this Clean Air Strategy will save society £1.7 billion every year by 2020, rising to £5.3 billion every year from 2030.

This comprehensive strategy shows how we will tackle air pollution and meet our legal targets to reduce five key, damaging air pollutants (nitrogen oxides, ammonia, volatile organic compounds, particulate matter and sulphur dioxide) by 2020 and 2030. The new strategy also sets out our world-leading ambition to reduce public exposure to particulate matter in line with World Health Organisation (WHO) guidelines. The Government are committed to halve the number of people living where concentrations of particulate matter are above this limit by 2025, but we want to go even further than this, and so we will set a new, ambitious, long-term air quality target.

Transport is a significant source of some types of air pollution, and we are already acting to tackle emissions from this source, with our NO₂ Plan, investing £3.5 billion in cleaner vehicle technology. The Government are also reaffirming their commitment to end the sale of conventional new diesel and petrol cars and vans from 2040.

However, transport is not the only source of pollution; this strategy will reduce emissions coming from all sources. Burning wood and coal to heat in homes makes up 38% of the UK's harmful particulate matter emissions. This is why we will ensure only the cleanest fuels will be available for sale and only the cleanest stoves will be available to buy and install by 2022. We will also make existing clean air legislation easier to enforce, and work with local authorities to increase the rate of upgrades of inefficient and polluting heating appliances.

The agriculture sector accounts for 88% of UK emissions of ammonia. Our Clean Air Strategy sets out the concerted action we will take to tackle ammonia from farming by supporting farmers to invest in infrastructure and equipment that will reduce emissions. We are also introducing new regulations which require farms to use low-emission farming techniques as well as regulations to minimise pollution from fertiliser use.

We will continue to support investment in clean air and, in partnership with UK Research and Investment (UKRI), we have launched a joint research programme worth £19.6 million to promote cleaner technologies. This will support the UK to continue to become world leaders in clean technology.

The Government want to help people live well for longer, and this strategy supports the Department of Health and Social Care's prevention strategy, and the NHS 10-year plan. We have also improved how we count the cost of air pollution, publishing revised damage costs today, which show the cost to society of air pollution is greater than previously thought. These costs reflect our improved understanding of the long-term health impacts of air pollution, incorporating the costs of additional health conditions such as heart disease and childhood asthma. This new work means that the estimated benefits of this strategy are even larger than previously anticipated.

This strategy is a key part of our 25-year plan to leave the environment in a better state than we found it. The Government will shortly bring forward an Environment Bill which will include primary legislation on air quality.

Government cannot act alone in tackling air pollution and our strategy sets out how we will work with businesses, farmers and industry to implement lasting solutions to reduce air pollution, and the importance of each of us taking action and playing an important role in cleaning up our air for the next generation.

[HCWS1248]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting: Update

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): In April, the UK hosted the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM). The summit was the largest of its kind in our history. Forty-six Heads of Government and 49 Foreign Ministers met and agreed a range of actions to build a Commonwealth that is fairer, more sustainable, more prosperous, and more secure.

As Chair-in-Office, the UK has continued to work with the three pillars of the Commonwealth—the Commonwealth Secretariat, its member states, and its organisations and networks to deliver on commitments made at CHOGM. To support this work, the UK announced over £500 million of projects under the four themes discussed at the summit. An overview of these commitments and projects has been placed in the Library of the House and I am pleased to report progress in a number of areas today.

To build a fairer Commonwealth, the UK is supporting nine Commonwealth member states to deliver 12 years of quality education for girls by 2030. I co-chaired the first meeting of the Platform for Girls' Education with the Kenyan Education Minister, Amina Mohamed, in September. The Platform will work together throughout the UK's period as Chair-in-Office and report on progress ahead of the CHOGM 2020 in Rwanda. The UK has also partnered with the Secretariat for Pacific Communities to launch the Pacific Commonwealth Equality Project, which will enable Pacific leaders to champion and advance human rights by strengthening the capacity of their countries to deliver on their international human rights commitments. Reinforcing the belief that effective Parliaments are one of the principal institutions of any functioning democracy, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association launched updated benchmarks for democratic legislatures in November. Following the offer made by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, a number of Commonwealth countries have expressed interest in reviewing and reforming outdated legislation that makes it possible to discriminate on the grounds of sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation. The Equality and Justice Alliance has held the first meeting of its Group of Experts, convened the first regional dialogue of high-level champions of reform, and has engaged national and regional civil society to support this work.

To build a more sustainable Commonwealth, the UK is delivering on the Commonwealth Blue Charter by helping member states protect and sustainably develop the ocean. Twenty-three Commonwealth countries have signed up to the UK and Vanuatu-led 'Commonwealth Clean Oceans Alliance' (CCOA) to tackle marine plastic pollution. Two of these countries joined the Alliance at the first CCOA Ministerial Meeting chaired by my noble Friend Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State for the Commonwealth, in the margins of the Sustainable Blue Economy Conference in Nairobi in November. During her visit to Kenya, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister also announced a Young Leaders' Plastic Challenge Badge to help an estimated 100,000 young people in the Commonwealth become leaders in raising awareness about reducing plastic consumption. In response to the challenge of climate change, the UK and New Zealand are also providing support for the establishment of a Regional Pacific Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) hub, which will help Pacific Island countries implement the Paris agreement.

To build a more prosperous Commonwealth, the UK is helping member states harness trade and investment as a means of delivering inclusive economic growth and prosperity. The Commonwealth Trade Facilitation Programme is helping member states implement the World Trade Organisation (WTO) trade facilitation agreement, creating more efficient customs procedures and boosting intra-Commonwealth trade. Scoping missions have already taken place in Eswatini, Tonga and Zambia; and technical support has already been delivered in Sierra Leone and Malawi. In October, Guyana became the first country to partner with the UK-funded Commonwealth Marine Economies Programme to develop a national maritime economy plan. The programme is supporting the sustainable development and growth of 17 Commonwealth small island developing states. To support inclusive and sustainable trade, the UK has partnered with the International Trade Centre to deliver

'SheTrades Commonwealth'. The project aims to promote women's economic empowerment by helping women-owned businesses to trade internationally. Following its launch in Bangladesh, Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria, over 2,300 women entrepreneurs have registered with the initiative and 518 companies have attended capacity building events.

To build a more secure Commonwealth, the UK is enhancing co-operation on cyber security by helping member states identify and address vulnerabilities and gaps in capacity. In support of the Commonwealth cyber declaration, the UK has partnered with the World Bank to deliver national cyber security reviews in a range of member states. We are on track to meet the commitment for every Commonwealth member state to voluntarily undertake a review by CHOGM 2020. The UK is also enabling Commonwealth countries to strengthen their national responses to modern slavery. This will include a legislative drafting seminar in March 2019 that will bring together parliamentarians from across the Commonwealth to consider how their legislation and wider national responses to modern slavery can be strengthened. Further training on how to tackle online child exploitation will be provided to 19 Commonwealth countries over the next 18 months.

Finally, we have sought to strengthen co-operation in international organisations. In Geneva, my noble Friend Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon hosted a meeting of Commonwealth Permanent Representatives to discuss greater co-operation between Commonwealth missions in advance of the Human Rights Council. New Zealand has hosted two similar meetings to discuss WTO reform. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister also included a passage on the Commonwealth in her speech to the UN General Assembly. She spoke explicitly as Commonwealth Chair-in-Office on behalf of the Heads of Government of 53 Commonwealth countries—over a quarter of the UN membership—to reaffirm their shared commitment to work together within a rules-based international system to address shared global challenges.

[HCWS1247]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Patient Rights and Responsibilities

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): I have today laid before Parliament a report on the effect of the NHS Constitution. The report has also been published on www.gov.uk, alongside an updated version of the handbook to the NHS Constitution.

The NHS Constitution, like the NHS, belongs to us all. It sets out the principles and values that underpin the NHS in England, and the rights to which patients, the public and staff are entitled, and pledges that the NHS has additionally made towards them. It also makes clear the responsibilities which we all have for supporting the NHS to operate fairly and effectively, and explanation of these has been strengthened in the handbook. We must all play our part in helping to make the NHS as good as it can be for ourselves, for our children, and for our grandchildren.

The report is based on an independent survey of staff, patients and the public. It describes how they view the impact of the Constitution, and its value in promoting and raising standards of care.

Many of us are increasingly turning to authoritative sources, such as the NHS website, for information on what they can expect from the NHS, how we can use it well, and how we can look after our own health.

In strengthening the patient and public responsibilities section in the Constitution handbook, which reflects our response to recommendations made in the House of Lords report on the long-term sustainability of the NHS and Adult Social Care, we have made clearer that patients and the public have a vital role to play in ensuring that the NHS remains sustainable, with its resources focused on those who need them most.

We have a dedicated NHS workforce, who work incredibly hard to deliver high quality care to all those who need it, when they need it. Despite the pressures they are under, they remain proud to be a part of the NHS, and firmly support the need for a Constitution. Awareness of the Constitution among staff is high, and among those who feel informed about the Constitution, more than ever said that it positively influences their day to day work. This highlights the Constitution's ability to empower and enthuse staff to do their best for patients. As we work with the NHS to take forward its new long-term plan, published on 7 January 2019 and underpinned by a funding settlement that will see the NHS budget grow by £20.5 billion in real terms by 2023-24, the Constitution continues to represent everything that the NHS stands for.

[HCWS1245]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Pensions Age and Working Age Benefits

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): The Government's reforms to the welfare system are designed to support those who need it and help people into work. We have reduced pensioner poverty to close to historically low levels and

the triple lock on the state pension has helped lift the incomes of millions of pensioners. Since 2010, we have increased the annual level of the basic state pension by £1,450. In 2018-19 we will spend £121.5 billion on benefits for pensioners and by 2023-24 this rises to £143.5 billion.

In 2012, Parliament voted to modernise the welfare system to ensure that couples, where one person is of working age and the other person is over state pension age, access support, where it is needed, through the working age benefit regime. This replaces the previous system whereby the household could access either Pension Credit and pension age Housing Benefit, or working age benefits.

Pension Credit is designed to provide long-term support for pensioner households who are no longer economically active. It is not designed to support working age claimants. This change will ensure that the same work incentives apply to the younger partner as apply to other people of the same age, and taxpayer support is directed where it is needed most.

I set out to Parliament last year that this change would be implemented once Universal Credit was available nationally for new claims. Today I can confirm that this change will be introduced from 15 May 2019. The change is being brought into effect in Great Britain through a Commencement Order^[1] under the Welfare Reform Act 2012. There will be an equivalent Order to introduce the change for Northern Ireland.

Couples with one partner under state pension age who are already in receipt of Pension Credit or pension-age Housing Benefit at the point of change will be unaffected while they remain entitled to either benefit.

In February 2017, Government published an employer-led strategy "Fuller Working Lives: A Partnership Approach", which sets out the importance of fuller working lives for employers and individuals. It also sets out action Government are taking to support older workers to remain in the labour market.

^[1] The Welfare Reform Act 2012 (Commencement No. 31 and Savings and Transitional Provisions and Commencement No. 21 and 23 and Transitional and Transitory Provisions (Amendment)) Order 2019.

[HCWS1249]

Petition

Monday 14 January 2019

OBSERVATIONS

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Changing Places Toilets

The petition of residents of Falkirk Constituency,

Declares that the petitioners believe that over a quarter of a million people with profound and multiple learning disabilities, as well as other disabilities that severely limit mobility, cannot use standard accessible toilets and need personal assistance to use the toilet or change continence pads; further that their needs can only be met by Changing Places toilets with adequate space and equipment, such as hoists; further that the need for these facilities is growing with the number of people with complex disabilities and increased life expectancy; further that 'British Standard 8300:2009 Design' of buildings and their approaches to meet the needs of disabled people recommends that Changing Places toilets should be provided in larger public buildings and complexes; and further that the current lack of Changing Places toilets is leading to thousands of disabled people experiencing a risk to injury and lack of dignity as families are forced to risk their own health and safety by changing their loved one on a toilet floor.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to proactively promote the installation of Changing Places toilets in all large public places, including Government buildings; and further to amend existing equality legislation to specifically require that Changing Places toilets should be provided in addition to standard accessible toilets in venues such as city centres, shopping centres, arts venues, hospitals,

transport hubs like train stations, airports and motorway service stations, leisure complexes, sporting stadiums and arenas, in order to enable all disabled people to go out, go to the shops, attend hospital appointments, enjoy community life and travel with the same dignity as everyone else.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by John Mc Nally, *Official Report*, 3 July 2018; Vol. 644, c. 294.]

[P002162]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak):

The Government recognise that providing Changing Places toilets is important and gives severely disabled people and their families the opportunity to visit public places which they otherwise would not be able to and can therefore make a huge difference to their quality of life.

We have been committed to promoting accessibility and the Government have been urging relevant building owners to consider installing Changing Places toilets, where they can. This is why we have worked with the Changing Places campaign to increase the number of facilities. The Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, with contributions from devolved governments, provided £70,000 to develop an online map that helps carers and disabled people find Changing Places toilets. There are now over 1,200 Changing Places toilets across the UK, up from just 140 in 2007.

Although the increase in numbers and action by forward looking building owners is to be welcomed, provision is haphazard, so we need to go further. We therefore announced our intention to consult in December 2018 on how we can increase provision of Changing Places toilet facilities in specific new, large buildings commonly used by the public, including a potential change to building regulations.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ministers-act-to-increase-changing-places-toilets-for-severely-disabled-people>

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PETITION

Monday 14 January 2019

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**not later than
Monday 21 January 2019**

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