

HOUSE OF COMMONS HANSARD

Leaving the EU: No Deal

19 December 2018

Leaving the EU: No Deal

Application for emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

Mr Speaker

I now call Keir Starmer to make an application for leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24. The right hon. and learned Gentleman has up to three minutes in which to make such an application.

16:10:00

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab)

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing time to hear this application for an emergency debate on a specific and important matter—namely, that this House has considered the matter of the Cabinet's decision to accelerate preparations for a no-deal outcome to Brexit following the Prime Minister's failure to allow this House promptly to express its view on the Government's deal in the light of the significant public expenditure involved.

Yesterday, the Government announced an additional £2 billion of spending to prepare for leaving the European Union without a withdrawal agreement. They have done so after denying the House the opportunity to express its view on the Government's deal or its view on leaving the European Union without a deal, by deferring the meaningful vote originally scheduled for Tuesday 11 December. If that vote had been held, I have no doubt that the Government's deal would have been roundly rejected, as would any proposal that we leave with no deal. No Government have the right to risk the wellbeing of the United Kingdom because of their own failed negotiations, and it is vital that the Government are held to account for their spending of public money, especially when the sums involved are so large and the stakes are so high. I therefore ask for this emergency debate to be held.

Mr Speaker

The right hon. and learned Gentleman asks leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24—namely, the matter of the Cabinet's decision to accelerate preparations for a no-deal outcome to Brexit following the Prime Minister's failure to allow this House promptly to express its view on the Government's deal in the light of the significant public expenditure involved. I do not think that the right hon. and learned Gentleman quoted this, but it is right for me to quote it. I have listened carefully to the application from the right hon. and learned Gentleman. I am satisfied that the matter raised is proper to be discussed under Standing Order No. 24. Has the right hon. and learned Gentleman the leave of the House?

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con)

No! No! No!

Mr Speaker

The objection has been raised by the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), which is in conformity with our procedures. In those circumstances, if there is an objection it is necessary for at least 40 Members to rise in their places in the House in order to facilitate such a debate. It is I think clear that somewhat in excess of 40 Members are standing in the House.

Application agreed to (not fewer than 40 Members standing in support).

I thank the hon. Member for Wellingborough, who has faithfully complied with our procedures, but the fact is that the House has, under our rules, decided that the debate is sought. I thank Members for doing so. The debate will take place immediately, and it would ordinarily do so for up to three hours but, as the right hon. and learned Gentleman will know, it has to conclude by the moment of interruption, so it will be a little less than three hours. It is right that he should now open the debate—[Interruption.] In fact, this will happen after we have heard the 10-minute rule motion, so it will be somewhat shorter. This will be a second go of the day, and a fuller opportunity for the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) to speak on this important matter.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con)
rose—

Mr Speaker

Order. Mr Pound, calm yourself, man. I am sure that you have some witticism to share with a colleague, which will be of great interest to the said Member, but it could usefully be done outside the curtilage of the Chamber. The hon. Lady deserves the courtesy of the attention of the House, so I ask Members who wish to discuss other matters to do so elsewhere. We have just been talking about the need for respect. Let us show the hon. Lady respect as she introduces her ten-minute rule motion.

Leaving the EU: No Deal

Emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

16:24:00

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab)
I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of the Cabinet's decision to accelerate preparations for a no-deal outcome to Brexit, following the Prime Minister's failure to allow this House promptly to express its views on the Government's deal, in the light of the significant public expenditure involved.

The background to this debate is well known. This House was due to vote on the Government's deal on 11 December. The day before that vote, the Prime Minister pulled the vote, recognising that she was going to lose the vote, as she said, by "a significant margin" and saying that she wanted more time to "secure further assurances" on the backstop. I was in the House when the Prime Minister made her statement on 10 December, and in my view the majority were clearly against deferring the vote. No doubt for that reason the Prime Minister did not have the courage to put her decision to defer the meaningful vote to a vote, preferring instead for the Government not to move their own business.

The problem with the Prime Minister's approach is obvious, which is why the majority were against deferring the vote. First, the Prime Minister is highly unlikely to get meaningful changes to the withdrawal agreement. Secondly, unless meaningful changes to the withdrawal agreement are made, the majority in this House are not likely to support her deal, whenever it gets put. That is a point bluntly accepted by the International Trade Secretary, who said recently

“It is very difficult to support the deal if we don't get changes to the backstop. I don't think it will get through.”

The first problem about getting meaningful changes to the withdrawal agreement was laid bare last week. After informal talks on Monday and Tuesday of last week between the Prime Minister and other leaders, and then the EU summit on Thursday and Friday, the EU made its position clear. The President of the Commission said that there is

“no room whatsoever for renegotiation”.

The Commission spokesperson said:

“The European Council has given the clarifications that were possible at this stage, so no further meetings with the UK are foreseen.”

The EU Council also made it clear that the withdrawal agreement is “not open for renegotiation”. That is why there have been such strong calls this week for the vote to be put back to this House this week.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab)

Many of us, right hon. and hon. Members in this House, are becoming increasingly suspicious that the reason why this Brexit can is being kicked further and further down the road by the Prime Minister is to take us to the eleventh hour, and then hold the British public and parliamentarians in this House to ransom, saying, “It is my deal or no deal.” Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that that is a disastrous and reckless policy, which is not in our national interest?”

Keir Starmer

I do agree and I will elaborate on that in just a moment. The strong calls this week for the vote to be put this week are so that, the deal having been defeated, as it inevitably will be, this House can get on with assessing what then are the available and achievable options for the future.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD)

Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that if this were a company and we were living outside the Westminster bubble, in the real world, we would not be allowed to take Christmas holidays while such an existential crisis is happening to our country? Does he agree that we should all be put on standby by this Government so that at the first available minute we can have a vote on this important matter?

Keir Starmer

I certainly agree that we need the vote as soon as possible, and I really do think it should have been on 11 December—if not then, it should have been this week. To elaborate on the point just made, the only purpose now in deferring the vote until 14 January is to run the clock down, and to attempt to present the vote as a binary choice between the Prime Minister's deal and no deal.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op)

Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that it is deeply dangerous to use the sort of scare tactics we saw being briefed out from No. 10 this morning, when it was said that somehow 3,500 troops were going to be put on the street? I asked the Home Secretary repeatedly about that after his own permanent secretary had told me that there were no such plans for troops to be used at our borders. Somebody is not telling the truth here—it is either the briefings coming out of No. 10 or somebody else.

Keir Starmer

I share my hon. Friend's concern and will elaborate on that point in just a minute. To build on that comment, as I have been saying for some time, I do not think for one moment that this House is going to accept the binary choice that the Prime Minister will attempt to put before us. A choice between bad and even worse is not a meaningful choice. Nor is leaving the EU on 29 March next year without a deal viable. It has never been viable, and as every day goes past it becomes less and less viable.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab)

I am sure that my right hon. and learned Friend is going to do this in his speech, but one thing that would greatly reassure not only the public but businesses and some of our public services, which are now being forced to spend unnecessarily billions of pounds that would be best spent on other things, would be if he could talk through how Parliament will ensure that no deal cannot happen.

Keir Starmer

I really think it is the duty of the Government and the Prime Minister to stand at the Dispatch Box and rule out no deal. That is the first thing, and that is the easiest way, because I think the vast majority of Members of the House would agree with it. If the Government will not do that, I am absolutely sure that this House will take the first opportunity to express its view. Whether by way of amendments to the motion in January, through other amendments, or by whatever means, the voice of this House and the majority who will not countenance no deal must be heard and will be heard. I have said it before, but I say it again: I think that deep down this Government and this Prime Minister know jolly well that no deal is not viable. That calls into question the expenditure that has been announced as additional expenditure, not the only expenditure.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con)

Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman accept that there is not a no deal, because if we leave without signing the withdrawal agreement, there will be various deals? Would he welcome the agreement on the common transit convention? Would he welcome the air services agreement? Would he welcome the facilitation of trade agreement? There are going to be plenty of agreements so that we can trade perfectly successfully—will he stop his scaremongering?

Keir Starmer

I shall come to that point in a minute, but simply listing all the things that need to happen between now and 29 March to get to a so-called managed no deal only makes the point: it is not going to happen in the three months available.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op)

Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that the clock is now ticking and the Government need seriously to start to think about extending article 50 so that they can send in some decent negotiators to negotiate a deal? Or, we can put this back to the British people in an election.

Keir Starmer

I do agree that serious consideration needs to be given to the timetable now set by article 50, because by 14 January we will be just nine weeks away from the proposed date of leaving the EU. On any view, the Government will then have to make a choice about what to do next. No plan B has ever been forthcoming. In the week or so before the deferral of the vote last week, the question everybody was asking was, “What is the Prime Minister’s plan B?” When she pulled the vote and ran away, we learned that she does not have a plan B. The Prime Minister will have to come to the Dispatch Box and make a statement about what she proposes happens next. If she stands at that Dispatch Box and says that she intends to take the UK out of the EU without a deal, I genuinely believe that Parliament—this House—will do everything that it can to stop that course of action.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind)

Given that it is the only route that gives legal certainty to be able to stop no deal, can I take it from what my right hon. and learned Friend is saying that if we get to the end and the only thing to do is revoke article 50, the official Opposition would support that, alongside Government Members?

Keir Starmer

What I have said is that I genuinely think that the majority in this House is against no deal. One reason why I feel strongly that the vote should be put as soon as possible is that the discussion and the debate about what happens next need to happen sooner rather than later because they will take time. We need then to assess what the options are and to see where the consensus of the House is. All that is happening in this deferment of the vote for weeks is wasting the time of the House that should be spent on the question of how we prevent leaving without a deal.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP)

rose—

Keir Starmer

I will give way, but then I will make some progress.

Joanna Cherry

I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way. Let me congratulate him on achieving this important debate this afternoon. On the question of the extension of article 50, is he, like me, not hearing from interlocutors in the EU that the EU would be unlikely to grant an extension of the article 50 period for further negotiation, but that it would grant an extension of the article 50 period for either a general election or a people’s vote?

Keir Starmer

I am grateful for that intervention. As the hon. and learned Lady knows, I have had a number of discussions about the issue of extension with the Commission, the Council and various EU countries. The clear message from them is that the only basis for an extension would be if it was coupled with a good reason for the extension. Therefore, again, that is why we need to get onto the debate about what happens if and when this deal is voted down because these are very serious considerations.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD)

Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that it is grotesque and obscene that we have a homelessness crisis in this country, which is visible right outside this building; elderly people not getting the care they need; special needs children not getting proper support; people waiting far too long for mental health support; and hospitals full up—all burning injustices—and this Conservative Government are spending billions of pounds preparing for a no deal, which is not necessary?

Keir Starmer

I do agree. I will be corrected if I am wrong, but I am given to understand that, tragically, one of those sleeping just outside the entrance and exit to this place died in the past 24 hours, and that underscores the point that has just been made.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con)

The words of the right hon. and learned Gentleman are that it is highly unlikely that there will be meaningful changes to this deal. If that is right, does he agree that it is vanishingly unlikely that a completely new deal along the lines that Labour, or indeed anyone else, might propose would also be agreed by the 29 March timetable? If that is right, and if it is also right that the EU would not extend article 50 to renegotiate a new deal, it effectively means that, by not supporting this deal, the Labour party risks becoming the handmaiden to no deal, and that is a real concern, does he not agree?

Keir Starmer

No, I do not accept that. I have had more conversations with people in Brussels than probably most people in this House about the question—the very important question—of what the position would be if the red lines that the Prime Minister laid down were different. The EU's position in private is confidential. Its position in public has been repeated over and over again. It has said that if the red lines had been different, a different negotiation could have happened. If the logical conclusion to the hon. Gentleman's point is that we on these Benches must simply support whatever the Prime Minister brings back because no deal is worse, then that is an extraordinary position. It means that there is no critical analysis and no challenge even if it is a bad deal, or the wrong deal for the country, and that, somehow, we must support it because of this binary choice, and we will not do so.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op)

My right hon. and learned Friend is making a very powerful speech about the absurd lack of leadership from the Government on this critical issue facing our country. Does he recognise that a cross-party letter, which was published on Monday and organised by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), has confirmed that, indeed, 19 Members on the Government Benches support ruling out a no-deal option in the national interest? Therefore, it is a matter of mere arithmetic that there is certainly no support for a no-deal crash out of the European option in this House. It is the duty of this Government to come to this House immediately and reflect the wishes of Parliament.

Keir Starmer

I am grateful for that intervention, and I agree with it.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab)

rose—

Keir Starmer

I am not sure that I am making a speech; I think that I am responding to interventions. I will take one more and then I really will make some progress.

Wayne David

I thank my right hon. and learned Friend. Does he agree that it is significant that, this morning, the new First Minister of Wales, Mark Drakeford, had a meeting with the Prime Minister and told her very clearly that she had a moral obligation to make sure that this country did not leave the EU without a deal?

Keir Starmer

I agree with my hon. Friend. I will take further interventions when I have made some progress.

The point that I am really making is that leaving the EU on 29 March next year without a deal is simply not viable, and I do not think that any responsible Government would do it.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab)

Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Keir Starmer

I will give way in a moment.

Treasury estimates of a no deal outcome would mean a 9.3% decline in GDP over 15 years. That would be an act of economic self-harm that no responsible Government should take. It would see every region of the UK worse off and would mean that there would be no common security arrangements in place and, of course, a hard border in Northern Ireland. In any event, the truth is that the Government simply have not prepared for it and it is now too late.

Let me give two very specific but obvious examples. Over the summer, the previous Brexit Secretary published 106 technical notices—the Government’s view of what needed to be done in order to prepare for no deal. What comes out of those 106 documents is that, taken together, they commit the Government to the creation or expansion of 15 quangos, further legislation in 51 areas, the negotiation of 40 new international agreements with the EU or others, and the introduction of 55 new systems and processes. That is the Government’s own analysis of what they need to do to prepare for no deal. Let us just stand back and consider that. The meaningful vote is scheduled for the week of 14 January. It is then just over nine weeks to 29 March. It is simply not credible to pretend that even the bare minimum in the Government’s own technical notices can be delivered in that nine weeks.

The second example is just so powerful. Two weeks ago today, the Chancellor answered a question from the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) about preparations at Dover, which is a pretty busy port—the busiest. Some of us have been down there a number of times to talk to the staff and management about what needs to be done, and they are very worried. This is what the Chancellor said:

“if we were to end up having a WTO-type trading arrangement with the European Union”,

that

“would involve some very significant infrastructure works that could not be done in a matter of months; they would take years to complete.”

However much money we throw at it now, how can we get over that problem—that the infrastructure at Dover will take years, not months? The Chancellor did not say that it would take months if there was more money; he said years, not months. The idea that we could somehow manage a no deal nine weeks after the meaningful vote only has to be put against that example to be seen to be ridiculous. This was confirmed by the National Audit Office, which said bluntly in October:

“The government does not have enough time to put in place all of the infrastructure, systems and people required for fully effective border operations on day one”.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD)

Is the right hon. and learned Gentleman aware that the non-disclosure agreements that were stopping officials sharing with business the Government's plans for no deal were lifted—I think it was only last week—to enable businesses to be aware of what the Government were planning for in relation to no deal?

Keir Starmer

I am grateful for that point. I think that businesses have begun to make their voice heard in the last day or two, expressing their concerns about a no deal exit.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP)

On 6 December in Exiting the European Union questions, when we were supposedly still in the middle of the debate on the deal, I sought reassurance about the supply of medical radioisotopes, which simply cannot be stockpiled because they have a half-life of hours. I was told to google what the French Government were doing. Well, in googling “radioisotopes” and “no deal”, I have found no reassurance. Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that this pantomime around no deal is frightening patients, doctors and people who run the NHS, and that it is a disgrace?

Keir Starmer

I agree wholeheartedly and thank the hon. Lady for making that point. We need only mention the reports—of course, we do not know—that there were discussions in Cabinet about medicines being supplied by ferries to show why this is not viable.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op)

Indeed, we have heard evidence in the Exiting the EU Committee that we could see a delay of two to three years in new medicines coming to the UK if the Government proceed as they intend. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that while the cost to businesses is now being talked about far more openly, there is a real cost to our citizens, with a leaked Department for Work and Pensions report suggesting that the Government are planning a strategy to deal with potential rising homelessness, poverty and suicide? Is this not a horrific place for our country to have reached, and far removed from what people thought they were voting for?

Keir Starmer

I am grateful for that intervention; I heard that point made earlier in a point of order. My hon. Friend underscores not just the concern about that very issue but the fact that the Government should have made a statement today about no deal preparations. It is unsatisfactory that we have had to go through this process just to get a debate. There should have been a statement so that Members could then ask specific questions of the Government about exactly those sorts of issues.

If anyone thinks that the EU is going to ride to the rescue and put in place a raft of reciprocal side deals, or waive their rules and laws for the UK, I would encourage them to read the EU's plans for no deal, which were updated and published only at lunchtime today. On contingency measures, the EU says that they will only be taken where strictly necessary and in the interests of the EU, they should not replicate the benefits of membership of the Union, and they can be revoked by the EU at any time. This is what a no deal exit looks like. On information and data exchange, it says that work strands are in place such as the disconnection and adaptation of databases and IT systems and other platforms for communication and information exchange to which the United Kingdom should no longer have access. On air transport, it says that UK air carriers will not be able to conduct EU-to-EU flights. On road haulage, it says that a permit system would allow for considerably less traffic than currently takes place between the Union and the United Kingdom. On goods, it says that all

relevant EU legislation on imported goods and exported goods will apply after 29 March. That means customs checks, declarations, and origin tests. It means a raft of checks on agriculture. It means severe friction, and it comes nine weeks after the meaningful vote.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab)

Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that it is utterly irresponsible of the Prime Minister to threaten Members of Parliament into a deal or a no deal situation given what is happening, and given the dangers and risks? She is playing Russian roulette with people's lives and livelihoods, and she will be responsible for causing chaos in this country if she does not rule it out right now, before we go into recess.

Keir Starmer

I agree wholeheartedly. I cannot believe that the analysis that the Opposition have undertaken is not the same as that undertaken by the Government. They know very well that no deal is not viable and they know very well the risks involved, and that calls into question the decisions that were made yesterday.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op)

Coming towards Christmas, I am sure that Members across the House will have people coming into their surgeries, as I have: the mum and son who lost their jobs because of Brexit and were referred to the food bank; the dad who came on another issue, breaking down, weeping and saying, "I'm having counselling, I'm on anti-depressants", because of a no deal Brexit—he is paying workers and he is worried about their mortgages and their Christmas. When we start worrying about stockpiling food, we know that only the poorest suffer who cannot afford to stockpile and cannot afford the most expensive food. I am sure that does not happen in the restaurants in Mayfair. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree?

Keir Starmer

I do agree. I am sure that Members across the House have had concerned constituents coming up to them in advice surgeries, or on buses and trains and in the street, expressing their concern about the state of politics, the place we have got to in these negotiations, and the prospect of no deal. It is not often that members of the public talk about politics in the way that they are doing at the moment. They are talking about it in a very anxious state because they realise just how badly these negotiations have gone.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab)

I do not think the Government accept the level of chaos that this will provide. My Ford factory has 24 deliveries of parts a day. If one of those lorries does not arrive, the factory will have to stop production for a day, which means a loss of half a million pounds. Zimmer Biomet makes knee and hip replacements and sends all its products from the Netherlands, which arrive in our hospitals on the day of surgery. It cannot guarantee that if the lorries are not coming through. There will be chaos in every aspect of life in this country.

Keir Starmer

I am grateful for that powerful point, and it applies to the whole of manufacturing. In the last two years, I have tried to visit all the major manufacturers across the UK and see for myself the systems they are running. Automobile manufacturing is a classic example, with goods coming in from the EU all the time. Those goods are tracked, so that it is known to the hour when they will arrive. In some operations, the components arrive four hours before they go on the production line. That is why any interruption of the current arrangements poses a real threat to manufacturing and why what is said about Dover not being ready for years, not months, is significant for manufacturing.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab)

My right hon. and learned Friend is making an extremely powerful case. Does he share my puzzlement—nay, exasperation—that some people in government and on the Government Benches appear to think that they know more and better about the implications of no deal than the businesses that make things, export things, import things and transport things? Those businesses have formed a queue to meet all of us, and no doubt Ministers, to express their concern about what this will mean. Does that not show just how irresponsible it is of the Government to suggest that this could happen?

Keir Starmer

I could not agree more. I have spoken to hundreds of businesses across the whole of the UK, either one on one or in small groups—I am not talking about halls full of businesses—and I have not come across any business that says that no deal could be a satisfactory outcome. Anybody who suggests that businesses in some way would support that approach needs to point me to the businesses they have been talking to, because I have obviously been talking to lots of businesses that they are not talking to. In every case, when they lay out their concerns to me, I faithfully ask them whether they have said the same to the Government, and I ask them to say the same to me as they say to the Government. On a number of occasions, I have made it my business, in a friendly way, to point the Brexit Secretary to businesses that have talked to me and suggest he has a conversation with them.

Keir Starmer

I will make some progress, because I have given way many times.

The point is this, and it has come out through all the interventions: there is no such thing as a managed no deal. That is why I have repeatedly said that no deal is not credible and not viable. It is a political hoax intended only to put pressure on Members of this House to back the Prime Minister's deal.

Yesterday, instead of trying to find a viable way of getting a deal through the House, the Cabinet agreed to ramp up no deal preparations, notwithstanding all the valid points that have been made. An additional £2 billion of taxpayers' money has been allocated to that, which includes half a billion pounds to the Home Office, £400 million to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, and £200 million for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. That funding will be welcomed by some in the European Research Group.

However, let us look at the reaction of businesses. The biggest customs firm inside Dover told "Channel 4 News" yesterday that crashing out of the EU without a deal would create "Armageddon" for the UK. That is business speaking. That is what it said to "Channel 4 News". It is not me or anybody in this House; it is businesses that are running Dover telling us what they think the outcome would be. Five British business groups, including the Confederation of British Industry, said this morning:

"it is clear there is simply not enough time to prevent severe dislocation and disruption in just 100 days."

That is the voice of business.

No wonder it is reported that there was considerable conflict of views around the Cabinet table. The Justice Secretary is reported to have told the Cabinet that a managed no deal is not a viable option. He apparently added that

“the responsibility of Cabinet ministers is not to propagate unicorns but to slay them.”

The Work and Pensions Secretary is reported to have told the Cabinet:

“Just because you’ve put a seatbelt on, it doesn’t mean you should crash the car.”

I agree with them. The first duty of the Government is to protect the public, and a no deal Brexit would put the public at risk. That is not scaremongering; it is reality.

Even if the Government did choose to push ahead with a no deal, I am convinced that Parliament would stand in their way. The overwhelming majority of Members in this House would not countenance a no deal Brexit. I pay tribute to the, I think, now three hon. Members opposite who have already said that they would quit the Conservative party if the Government pressed ahead with no deal. I suspect that they are not alone. No Government have the right to plunge the country into chaos because of their own failure, and this Parliament will not let them.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab)

I am not so sure that the Government grasp the seriousness of this situation. There are 800,000 jobs in the automobile industry alone at stake and about 300,000 in the west midlands, so we have to get some sort of deal, but not the deal that these are proposing. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree about that?

Keir Starmer

I do agree, and at this stage of the negotiations, what I think should happen is that the deal should be put to a vote and the vote taken, and then we should have a grown-up conversation about what the real options are and stop pretending that some sort of managed no deal is the default position. It is not, and this House will never accept that it is the default position.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab)

My right hon. and learned Friend has said several times—and I understand why—that this House will not allow the Government to proceed on the basis of no deal, but one of the difficulties that we have, as we have seen over the last fortnight, is that the power of the Government to manage the business and completely ignore any motions of this House that are not legally binding is quite phenomenal. Do we not need to address that inherent problem in our system if we are really going to have a chance of success?

Keir Starmer

That is a very powerful point, and what the last few weeks have shown are some of the inadequacies in the procedures of this House. The idea that the Government can simply not move their business and do not have to have a vote on it is not acceptable. The fact that we have to have a SO 24 debate on an issue of this significance, because we cannot force a statement, shows the inadequacies.

The only other thing I would say on that very important point is this: given that there have to be at least 51 changes to legislation—even on the Government’s own analysis—under the 106 technical notices, there will be opportunities for amendments in this House, unless the Prime Minister says, “I am simply not going to take any business until April, of any sort whatsoever.” I do not think that

this Prime Minister would do that. I knew her when she was Home Secretary and I was Director of Public Prosecutions. I know how seriously she takes security and counter-terrorism issues. I do not think that this Prime Minister would try to force no deal on this House without the necessary precautions—even on her own case—with legislation.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op)

Given the experience that we had just over a week ago, what guarantees do we have that the Prime Minister will not, on 10 or 11 January, decide that she has some sign from the European Union that might mean that she will get the better deal at that point that she has not managed to get in the meantime, and then pull the vote yet again?

Keir Starmer

Well, we have no guarantees. Like everybody else, I heard various Members of the Prime Minister's Cabinet on the radio on the morning of 10 December assuring all listeners and viewers that the vote was 100% guaranteed for the next day, only for it to be pulled at the last minute.

Having shadowed three Brexit Secretaries this year alone, I know as well as anyone that the House has been consumed by Brexit. However, at the end of the year, let us look at where we are. We have a Prime Minister unable to put her deal to the vote and no prospect of further renegotiation. Rather than trying to reach across Parliament to break the deadlock, we have a Government who are now actively pursuing a policy that is not supported by the Cabinet, not supported by Parliament and not supported by the country. It is reckless and irresponsible. It is an indictment of a wasted year. Even now, I urge the Government to take no deal off the table and find a sensible way forward.

16:59:00

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Chris Heaton-Harris)
From the start, this Government have been clear that we do not expect or want a no-deal scenario. Delivering the deal negotiated with the European Union remains our top priority. It is also the best way to deliver on the democratic choice of the British people and the best way to deliver certainty to businesses and the people of our country.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab)

Will the Minister give way?

Chris Heaton-Harris

I will make some progress, but then I will give way.

Our efforts to get this deal have not changed. However, with 100 days until we leave the European Union, the Government's continued duty is to prepare for every eventuality, including a no-deal scenario. This is because—like it or not—no deal remains a risk if this House does not support the Prime Minister's deal.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab)

Does the Minister not accept, having heard in recent days from so many businesses and organisations around the UK, that they speak with a unified voice? Whether it be the Confederation of British Industry, the Federation of Small Businesses, the Engineering Employers Federation, the British Chambers of Commerce or the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry, they are all unified in their position, which is that no deal is not acceptable and we cannot plan it. Does he not therefore accept that this is just a negotiating ploy—a charade that the Prime Minister is leading

us on—and that all the time this is costing our businesses greatly and leading to uncertainty and to a loss of jobs?

Chris Heaton-Harris

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I have to say that the businesses I have visited all wanted people in this House to vote for the Prime Minister's deal because that gives them the certainty that they require.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD)

Is it not true, however, that if businesses were given a real choice, they would actually prefer to stay in the European Union altogether? The only argument that the Prime Minister is putting forward is that the people have voted but, in that majority vote of 17.4 million, a considerable number of people voted to leave the European Union without any deal. If the Government are finally to put that fantasy to bed, it would look entirely different if we put the vote back to the people, which is what we should do anyway.

Chris Heaton-Harris

I get the feeling that the hon. Lady would not accept the result of a referendum that went against her in any shape or form. I am afraid I just say that the Prime Minister has negotiated a very good deal for this country, so the best way to guarantee certainty to businesses and the people of our country is to vote for that deal.

Ruth George

The businesses I have spoken to in Brexit summits in my constituency have said that the deal on the table from the Prime Minister gives no certainty whatsoever. It is simply a stopgap until the end of 2020. After that, the future declaration is not legally binding and we will not even have the same Prime Minister in place to negotiate and deliver it. It is the worst of all possible worlds.

Chris Heaton-Harris

I have to disagree with the hon. Lady. I have met plenty of businesses. Indeed, the hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) on the Opposition Front Bench and I share a very big manufacturing business called Cummins, which is a very strong advocate for certainty in this area and has written to hon. Members asking us to vote for the deal.

Mr Sweeney

The Minister mentions the need for certainty. Let us create some degree of certainty now and rule out the disastrous proposition of a no deal. Under no circumstances can the Government allow it. At least 19 of his Tory colleagues agree that no deal cannot be a proposition that can ever be enacted by this Government. Therefore, just rule it out now and provide some degree of certainty to business at least.

Chris Heaton-Harris

The best way to rule out a no deal is to vote for the deal we have on the table.

Extensive work to prepare for this has been under way for over two years. It was commenced by my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) when he was in my role.

Dr Whitford

I have to say that the Minister was quite cheeky to me, on 6 December, in telling me to google the French Government's plans. Will he take the opportunity now to reassure the president and the deputy president of the Royal College of Radiologists, and indeed radiologists, cancer specialists

and their patients up and down the UK on the provision of a safe supply of medical radioisotopes, which simply cannot be stockpiled?

Chris Heaton-Harris

I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention and I apologise to her if I was cheeky on that particular day, but I understood that she would not believe a Minister of the Crown at this Dispatch Box when articulating what is going to happen to mitigate any problems with flow on the French side of the short straits.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab)

rose—

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP)

rose—

Chris Heaton-Harris

I will give way in a second. The reason for saying, “Would she google?” was that the French Assembly passed a law on the Monday before. There is a host of issues. The hon. Lady can look up what they are going to do to mitigate the problems with flow, but equally the Government have a host of mitigation solutions for this problem.

Chris Heaton-Harris

I give way to the hon. Member for Darlington, whom I mentioned.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab)

I am grateful to the Minister for allowing me to intervene after he mentioned the factory in my constituency. I visited that factory and met staff on Friday. I wonder whether he would share with the House what Cummins said to him about the prospect of no deal.

Chris Heaton-Harris

Yes, I certainly can. They do not want a no deal; they want a negotiated deal and they have written to Members of this House, asking them to accept the deal that is on the table.

Chris Heaton-Harris

I give way to the Chair of the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union.

Hilary Benn

I thank the Minister for giving way. Members of the Committee are looking forward to taking evidence from him on no-deal planning on the Wednesday after we get back from recess. May I ask him a question about facts? No deal will mean that we lose preferential access to our nearest, largest and most important trading partners—the other countries of the EU, and the 70 countries to which we have access because of the 40 deals that the EU has negotiated. What assessment have the Government made of the additional cost to businesses of the customs declarations and rules of origin certificates that those businesses that export at the moment under that preferential access do not even have to think about, but will have to start making arrangements for the day after 29 March? How much will it cost them and what will it do to their viability?

Chris Heaton-Harris

I very much look forward to coming before the right hon. Gentleman’s Committee in the early part of the new year. I would refer him to the partnership pack. It is online, on gov.uk. There are 100

pages of what businesses need to do to make sure that they conform with any new processes that might be required in a no-deal circumstance and the elements of cost that are associated with them.

Chris Heaton-Harris

May I continue for one moment? Then I will happily give way to everyone.

Seema Malhotra
rose—

Chris Heaton-Harris

The hon. Lady is a very persistent member of the Committee.

Seema Malhotra

Further to that point on the 40-plus trade deals that the EU has with 70 other countries, which many of our businesses will be trading with currently under preferential terms, accounting for about £150 billion of trade each year, those are set to fall straight after we leave the European Union, particularly if there is no deal, and their future is uncertain even if we have a deal. What advice is the Minister giving those businesses about how they will be trading in future?

Chris Heaton-Harris

The Government are actually working to roll over all those deals, and the hon. Lady will see announcements in coming days to deal with some of those points.

Mr Jim Cunningham

Have the Government looked at the costs that will result from our leaving the EU, whether in terms of commodities, pharmaceuticals or farming? Specifically, food prices are a big issue for the National Farmers Union, which I met a couple of weeks ago.

Chris Heaton-Harris

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I know that he has long-standing concerns about what would happen in the case of a no deal, but I can honestly say to him that the best way to mitigate, to stop that problem from happening, is to vote for the deal that is on the table.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab)
Will the Minister give way?

Chris Heaton-Harris

No. I shall continue with my speech for a moment, if I may.

As I said about 20 interventions ago, extensive work to prepare for a no-deal scenario has been under way for two years; it commenced under the stewardship of my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe. For instance, we have already successfully passed critical legislation, signed international agreements, and guaranteed certain EU funding in a no-deal scenario. Further milestones will be reached and achieved in the coming days. Yes, Mr Deputy Speaker: this work continues, even during the recess period. Cabinet has now agreed to proceed with the Government's next phase of no-deal planning. We have reached the point where we need to accelerate and intensify preparations, and this means we will set in motion our remaining no-deal plans, including finalising the international agreements and delivering the legislation we need.

Owen Smith

The Minister talks about accelerating the plans. Why does he not just acknowledge to the House that this is a £2 billion PR stunt? This has been completely exposed by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) on the Opposition Front Bench as a hoax: a sham exercise trying to blackmail this House. The Minister knows—his own Government have acknowledged it—that it would cost our country 10% of GDP, or £200 billion a year, if we proceeded down this route. He does not want to be a part of a Government doing that to our country, does he?

Chris Heaton-Harris

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point. On the £2 billion he talks about, that is preparing for both leaving with a deal and without a deal. The Government have to prepare for both eventualities and plans are well developed.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab)

I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Is he trying to tell us that there are no extra costs in the preparations for no deal? Furthermore, can he confirm to the House today that none of the permanent secretaries, who are the accounting officers, at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department for Transport, the Department of Health and Social Care, HMRC, the Treasury and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy have said to Ministers that they require special authorisation, because Ministers are asking them to spend money that is not even in line with Government policy?

Chris Heaton-Harris

I did not say that none of the £2 billion was going to no deal in that situation, and I have not heard any claims relating to what the hon. Lady said in the second part of her intervention.

The Government's plans are well developed and have been designed—

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab)

I am most grateful to the Minister. I just wondered whether he would answer the point from my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith). Does the Minister admit that there is no majority in this House for no deal, that that is not going to pass and that, therefore, all he is doing is scaring businesses and scaring 5 million people, the EU citizens living in this country and UK citizens living in UK countries? Is that not political gamesmanship and an appalling way to treat people?

Chris Heaton-Harris

No. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I humbly point out to him that the House has passed legislation in this area and the best way to avoid no deal is to vote for the Prime Minister's deal. If anybody is trying to scare people it would be people who are raising the fear in not voting for this deal.

Chris Heaton-Harris

I will happily give way to my friend, the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant).

Chris Bryant

That's me done for, isn't it?

I honestly do not see how there is time enough, even if the Prime Minister's deal were agreed on 14, 15 or 16 January, to get the implementation Bill in place in time for 29 March, so I am sure the Government are going to have to revoke article 50. My biggest anxiety, however, is that, if there is

no deal, am I right in saying that we will, from the day after 29 March, no longer be a member of the European arrest warrant? We will, therefore, have no extradition agreement with any of the other countries in Europe from that day. Is that not putting this country's security at risk?

Chris Heaton-Harris

The hon. Gentleman raises sensible points, but I can say to him that the best way to mitigate against all those things is to vote for the deal that is on the table.

Our plans are well developed and have been designed to provide flexibility to respond to a negotiated agreement, as well as preparing us for the eventuality of leaving without a deal.

Chris Heaton-Harris

I will just carry on for a couple more minutes and then I will happily give way to all those standing.

At the heart of the Government's approach to preparing for a no-deal scenario is a commitment to prioritise stability for citizens, consumers and business, to ensure smooth operations of business infrastructure and public services, and to minimise any disruption to the economy. As we said on 6 December, we have made a unilateral commitment to how citizens' rights would work in a no-deal scenario. All European Union citizens who are resident in the UK by 29 March 2019 will be eligible to apply for settled status. They will be able to live, work and study as they do today. The basis for qualifying for status would be the same as proposed in a deal scenario. EU citizens would have until 31 December 2020 to obtain a status under the scheme. Once granted a status, EU citizens would be able to leave the UK for up to five consecutive years without losing their right to return.

We are pleased that the EU has today encouraged member states also to make a generous offer on citizens' rights—this is a step in the right direction—but we hope that member states will now go forward and guarantee this and that the EU will now open up engagement with us on other important issues. Let me be clear: a no-deal outcome and move to WTO terms, which some hon. Members have suggested would be preferable to a deal, would lead to disruption and potential harm to critical industries in the short term. We cannot solve the issues that may arise in a no-deal scenario, but we can, as a Government, mitigate them by prioritising continuity where possible. Indeed, continuity is a thread that runs through our no-deal plans.

Tom Brake

The Minister has just outlined all the risks associated with no deal. He needs now to discount and rule out no deal. No one on the Opposition Benches believes the Government will push that forward, and the Government will not succeed in convincing any Opposition Member that, because their no-deal option is so bad, the Prime Minister's option is attractive. It is not, and we all know that.

Chris Heaton-Harris

As the right hon. Gentleman might have heard me say before, the best way to mitigate no deal is to vote for the deal on the table.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP)

We have said that the Minister must rule out no deal. Members across the Chamber from all parts of the UK are mindful of the devastating impact of Tory austerity on public services, and at this time he wants to spend billions more on no deal. He knows that no deal would devastate our public services even further. On that basis, will he rule out no deal?

Chris Heaton-Harris

The best way to mitigate no deal is to vote for the only deal on the table.

Stephen Kinnock

The key point about preparations for no deal is that it clearly takes two to tango. For example, we need to know what the French Government are doing about the port in Calais. The head of HMRC told the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union recently that the French Government were categorically not talking to him about Calais because they could not do so under the terms of article 50—bilateral contacts are not allowed—and the French Government have legislation stating that, in the case of the UK withdrawing from the EU without an agreement, British nationals and their family members residing in France would be staying illegally. Will the Minister please explain what he is doing to get the French Government to participate in his no-deal preparations?

Chris Heaton-Harris

If the hon. Gentleman had listened to the debate in the French Assembly only last week, he would have heard a French Minister say that the package to UK citizens living in France would be the most generous possible—[Interruption.] No, Madame Loiseau has said that on the record. He would also have heard that the number of border checkpoints at Calais would increase from two to 10, that a border inspection post would be built and that technology would also be used, with the sole purpose of ensuring the flow of goods on the Calais side of the short strait.

It has always been our intention to accelerate no-deal preparations if needed as we neared Brexit day, although our hope has always been that we leave with a deal and that they will not be needed. Our communication with businesses and the wider public about a no-deal scenario will likewise increase as we approach our exit from the EU, until such time as we can be confident that planning for no deal is no longer needed. We now recommend that businesses also ensure they are prepared and enact their own no-deal plans as they judge necessary. In the coming weeks, and until the deal is secured and ratified by the House, we will also publish further advice on the steps that people, including UK nationals living in the EU and EU citizens living here in the UK, may need to take to prepare for our exit from the EU.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op)

The Minister says that no one wants no deal. I think that that is generally the considered view of the vast majority of the House, and it is not hard to see why. We see our constituents losing their jobs now. We see the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care spending money on fridges now. We see billions of pounds being spent on arguments about whether we are going to have the Army at the ports. We are in this position because of the way in which the Government have proceeded.

I know that this place is not given to introspection, but does the Minister accept any responsibility—do the Government accept any responsibility—for how it has come to this? Would the Minister care to say what he would have liked the Government to do differently, so that we could have avoided this? I promise him that if he just says that everybody should vote for his deal, people will laugh, but the public will be watching all of us and wondering what 2019 will bring, so will he please give a decent answer to our constituents?

Chris Heaton-Harris

I have to say that I think the decent answer is the one that the hon. Lady would expect from me. I hear what she is saying, I really do. I should love to have a moment of introspection—I should have loved to be in the negotiating room—but we now have on the table a very good deal for this country, and the best way to mitigate a no-deal scenario is to vote for that deal.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab)

The Government are very short of legislative time to prepare for no deal. Will the Minister outline the process for possibly extending article 50?

Chris Heaton-Harris

It is a matter of Government policy that we will not be revoking article 50.

As I said earlier, work preparing for no deal is not just starting now. As a responsible Government, we have spent more than two years making extensive preparations for all scenarios, including no deal. For instance, over the summer we published the 106 technical notices to which the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) referred. They contained, among many other items, guidance for the public on travelling to the EU, covering driving, passports, pet passports and flights; advice for businesses on various changes, including changes relating to data protection, copyright and intellectual property; and guidance for organisations that receive EU funding on how they can continue to receive it in a no-deal scenario.

Since then, we have taken further steps to ensure that people and businesses are ready. That has included publishing more than 100 pages of guidance for businesses on processes and procedures at the border in a no-deal scenario; contacting 145,000 businesses that trade with the EU, telling them to start getting ready for no-deal customs procedures; advising hundreds of ports of entry, traders, pharmaceutical firms and other organisations that use the border about the disruption that they might experience so that they can get their supply chains ready; and producing a paper on citizens' rights, giving people clarity about their future and the fact that they will be able to continue to live their lives as they do now.

Seema Malhotra

I thank the Minister for giving way again. He is being extremely generous in taking interventions. The Speaker said earlier that there was no cap on repetition in the Chamber, but I think that he has won the award today.

My I gently say to the Minister that publishing documents day after day is not preparing this country? We are coming up to Christmas, and in three months we will leave the European Union. Businessmen are busy running their businesses and employing people, and we are approaching the end of the road. The Minister has said that it is not Government policy to extend article 50, but does he agree that it is legally possible to extend or, indeed, revoke it?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle)

Order. Many Members want to speak, and we are running out of time. The debate must finish at 7 pm, so please, let us be courteous to everyone.

Chris Heaton-Harris

It is Government policy that we will not revoke article 50, but I hear what the hon. Lady says. She will hear, in the coming days and weeks, why the Cabinet took the decision to increase the pace of our no-deal preparation, and she will hear a lot more about what the Government are doing, and what we are asking businesses to do, should we reach the unlikely point of a no-deal scenario.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab)

The Minister has made very clear, on several occasions, that he thinks that the best way of avoiding the no-deal situation that he does not want to see is to vote for the deal. Does he accept that his preferred "best way" may not—indeed, is unlikely to—come to pass? Is he really telling the House that if, in his view, the best is not possible, the extent of his ambition, and the Government's

ambition, is to mitigate the disaster of no deal, when he has the option of avoiding it by ruling it out?

Chris Heaton-Harris

The hon. Gentleman is a sensible and long-standing Member of this House with great connections to the auto trade and many other businesses in his constituency, and I would like to think that he will be listening to them over the course of the next few weeks, and that perhaps he can be persuaded that the deal on the table is the best one for this country, for businesses and for certainty in this area.

Chris Heaton-Harris

I am not going to give way again for another few seconds.

To answer a point raised by the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras, we have brought forward legislation that takes account of different scenarios, including the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, the Nuclear Safeguards Act 2018, the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018, and the Haulage Permits and Trailer Registration Act 2018, and I am sure that a number of Members present today have sat diligently in Committees ensuring that the secondary legislation we require is well scrutinised. We are confident of the UK's long-term prospects in all scenarios, and we will ensure that the public finances and the UK economy remain strong, and we have taken extensive steps to provide businesses and citizens with advice and guidance aimed at helping to mitigate the potential impacts of not having a deal.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op)

Will the Minister confirm or deny reports put out that the Army is on standby to slaughter thousands of lambs in the event of a no deal? We put that to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs at the Select Committee and he said he had no knowledge of this. I therefore wonder whether this is No. 10 putting out scare stories to scare us into this deal.

Chris Heaton-Harris

I think it might be the hon. Gentleman who is making things up.

The Government are also ensuring that staff have the correct training and skills to undertake this preparation effectively, and we are confident of the UK's long-term prospects in all scenarios. More than 10,000 civil servants are working on Brexit with a further 5,000 in the pipeline, which will allow us to accelerate our preparation as necessary, and hopefully for a deal.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP)

General Sir Nick Carter said on "The Andrew Marr Show" on 11 November when asked if the Army would be involved in the distribution of food and medicines:

"We're not involved in that, no. We're involved in thinking hard about what it might involve."

So will the Minister tell us now what the Government intend to do with the troops they are planning to use?

Chris Heaton-Harris

The Government have no intention to use troops in our no-deal planning at all. To be absolutely clear, our priority remains delivering the deal we have negotiated with our European partners.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab)

The Minister is being very gracious in giving way to a large number of Members. He mentioned many different sectors and has referred to many colleagues' questions about them. My question is about the health service and in particular my local hospital, the Royal Berks in Reading. Some 12.5% of the staff of the hospital come from the EU, including many doctors, nurses and other clinicians. They are seriously concerned about the prospect of no deal, and, at a time when the NHS is losing many valuable staff, recruitment and retention are a serious issue for the service. It is facing its greatest winter crisis for many years. Surely the Minister can look into this issue and provide greater reassurance. Ultimately I believe that it is the most overwhelming argument for the Government to reject the prospect of no deal.

Chris Heaton-Harris

I hear the hon. Gentleman's heartfelt concerns, but I point him to the Government announcement earlier in December that guarantees for the people he is rightly concerned about, and who work so hard for us all in our health service and our other sectors, the rights and assurances they deserve.

Chris Bryant

Will the Minister give way?

Chris Heaton-Harris

I am afraid not. [Interruption.] The hon. Gentleman is the one person in the House I can say that to: no.

We are confident of the UK's long-term prospects in all scenarios, and we will ensure that the public finances and the UK economy remain strong, but with our EU exit approaching, we are accelerating our preparations as planned. It is the responsible thing to do, and we ask and recommend that people and businesses across the UK take the actions they judge to be necessary to be ready for leaving on 29 March next year.

17:28:00

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP)

I commend the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) on securing this emergency debate, and we are grateful to Mr Speaker for allowing it at such short notice. This is another instance of the parliamentarians of these four nations having the opportunity to debate what is by far the most serious and urgent matter affecting all of our constituents today, yet we debate it not with the support of the Government, but in spite of the Government; not a single Government Back Bencher stood in support of the application earlier.

For more than two years, the Government did next to nothing to plan for a no-deal Brexit, despite constantly telling us that no deal was better than a bad deal. Now, when everybody bar the Prime Minister realises that she has brought back a bad deal, we are suddenly being told that this bad deal is better than no deal after all. Practically the only positive thing that can be said about the Prime Minister's deal is that it is not quite as bad as no deal. The Government are spending a fortune on a massive propaganda campaign to try to get businesses and constituents to put pressure on us to support the deal. They are touring all around the British Isles—the Prime Minister did not go to Glasgow, but she went to Renfrewshire for 20 minutes—but they are not doing this to talk up the benefits of the Prime Minister's deal, because that would not take very long at all, would it? They are doing it talk up the likelihood of no deal. They are quite deliberately setting out to scare businesses and institutions, in the knowledge that that will encourage them to put pressure on us.

I can give the House an example of how transparent this is. A few weeks ago, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland arranged for a number of businesses and other bodies from Northern Ireland to come over here for a day, and she invited us all to go and speak to them about their concerns over a no-deal Brexit. They were there at the invitation of the Government to talk us out of no deal. I did not have time to speak to them all, but I asked many organisations from Northern Ireland, “If you could have any result you wanted from these negotiations, what would it be?” Every single one of them said, “Don’t do Brexit.” So when the Prime Minister and the Minister insist that the only way to stop no deal is to support the Prime Minister’s deal, I say no it is not. We can stop Brexit altogether. If we do that, the question of no deal and a bad deal can at the very least be put back to the next time the public get the choice to make that decision. Why have the Government suddenly started to put out so much publicity about the harmful impacts of no deal? The consequences of no deal have not changed. They were there for us all to see on the day after the referendum. Let us face it, they were there for all to see on the day before the referendum as well.

I commend the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), for securing this debate, and I earnestly hope that we can work together, along with a number of Government Members and with other parties here, to try to stop this madness altogether, but we cannot forget that the position we are now in was entirely foreseeable when Parliament gave the Prime Minister unconditional authorisation to trigger article 50. Disastrous failing has undoubtedly followed disastrous failing on the part of Her Majesty’s Government at every stage in the process, but there has also been a disastrous failing on the part of Her Majesty’s loyal Opposition. When they needed to oppose, they singularly failed to do so—with, I stress, some honourable exceptions.

I do not propose to spend much time on a line-by-line analysis of the £4 billion that has already been taken away from our health service, our police, our local authorities and other essential services to pay for the Government’s incompetence, because, although that is an eye-watering sum in anyone’s book, it is peanuts compared with the true cost of a no-deal Brexit, or indeed any kind of Brexit at all. I just want to draw attention to one line of that departmental allocation. It is not the biggest sum, by any stretch of the imagination, at less than 0.5% of the total, but to me it is the one that should warn us not to go anywhere near a no-deal Brexit in any circumstances. We know that £16 million extra has been allocated to the Police Service of Northern Ireland. I hope that no one in this Chamber can avoid a shudder at hearing that. A no-deal Brexit means that we need an additional £16 million for the Police Service of Northern Ireland. What do the Government think it is for? I can tell the House that it is not for extra traffic wardens.

I am astonished that we should ever need to remind anyone of what is at stake in Northern Ireland if we leave without a deal that secures the permanent status of the peace process, yet only two days ago, the Democratic Unionist party spokesperson on Brexit, the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), asked the Prime Minister:

“Would it not be far better to walk away now with £39 billion in her pocket and with her hands free”?—[Official Report, 17 December 2018; Vol. 651, c. 548.]

No, it would not. The vast majority of the people in Northern Ireland are saying just now, “Do not walk away with no deal in any circumstances whatsoever.” The price that Northern Ireland would have to pay for a no-deal Brexit cannot be measured in sums of money, but if it could, it would be well in excess of £4 billion.

The Government’s motivation for suddenly turning up the heat on no deal is as transparent as it is manipulative. They know that they cannot get a majority in Parliament for the Prime Minister’s

deal. Instead of accepting that and seeking to build a consensus that could get parliamentary support, which incidentally is something the Prime Minister of a minority Government should have been doing from day one, at the last minute the Government are seeking to coerce Parliament—some people might go as far as to say that they are seeking to blackmail Parliament—into voting for the Prime Minister’s deal by making no deal the only other option.

The Prime Minister still insists that no deal is the only alternative, but that is not true, and we know from her own words that it is not true. She has tried the usual negotiating tactics. For example, when someone negotiates with two different sets of people in different directions, they put them in separate rooms and give the first set a scare story to persuade them to move towards them, and then they give the second set a scare story to persuade them to do the same. However, the Prime Minister made the mistake of telling everyone the same scare story at the same time. In the Chamber, when everyone was here, she warned the no Brexit brigade in her own party, “If you don’t vote for this deal, there will be no deal.” Then she warned the no deal brigade, “If you don’t vote for this deal, there will be no Brexit.”

The Prime Minister has put three options on the table. When we come to a meaningful vote, whether in this place or whether the public get a say, the third option of not leaving must be put back on the table. If she thought for one second that her deal would get more support in this House, or among the citizens of these four nations, than not leaving at all, she would be the first to put that question to a vote. The reason she will not ask the people again about Brexit is that she knows what the answer would be.

There have always been other options, but the Prime Minister has been too blinkered and dogmatic to recognise that they existed. Compromises were available. Some were offered two years ago by the Scottish Government, but she paid so little attention that I think she has forgotten they even existed. She must have forgotten that they existed, because when she came here to present her deal and said, “Nobody has ever put forward an alternative option,” she of course spoke in good faith—because everybody who speaks in Parliament does so in good faith. The only explanation must be that this document, presented to her by the national Government of one of our four nations, meant so little to her that she forgot it even existed.

Dr Whitford

Was not the Prime Minister’s fatal mistake to have painted herself into a corner with red lines before doing the first impact assessment, because otherwise she could have looked at what the best alternative was?

Peter Grant

I accept that is one of the disastrous mistakes the Prime Minister has made. We must remember that over the past few weeks, while the Government kept telling us, “But everyone in Europe has said that this is the only deal possible,” what they said was, “This is the only deal possible, given the firm negotiating stance that the United Kingdom has set.” That has been made perfectly clear, and I have no doubt that the Government have been told that by their contacts in Europe as well. Had the Prime Minister not painted herself into a corner with the stupid and unnecessary red lines, she would now have a much more workable deal that might well have got the acceptance if not the support of a significantly greater number of Members of this House.

One of the many examples of the almost despotic arrogance that we have seen from the Prime Minister is the fact that she, and she alone, appears to know exactly what was in the minds of the 17.5 million people when they put their mark against “Leave” on the ballot paper. None of us can know that for certain. I would never have the arrogance to say that I know what was in someone

else's mind, which is why I never call into question the motivations or integrity of those who happened to vote a different way from me. None of us can know for certain, but does anyone seriously believe that even a tiny fraction of those 17.5 million people voted for lower living standards, for food shortages, for the possibility that patient safety, and even patients' lives, will be put at risk as a result of difficulties in getting essential medical supplies to them, for the possibility of troops on the streets to quell violent civil disorder, or for the likelihood of God only knows what for the future of Northern Ireland? I do not know what those 17.5 million people voted for, but I would be astonished if anything more than a tiny fraction voted for that kind of nightmare scenario, all of which is taken either from official Government statements or from unofficial and unattributable Government briefings.

Wera Hobhouse

I have said that again and again. Some 17.4 million people voted to leave the European Union. As we know from Government Members, within that leave vote people are split. So can the Government tell us—I would be interested in the hon. Gentleman's views—how many of those 17.4 million people voted to leave without a deal and how many voted for the deal that the Prime Minister has brought back? Taken together, when we consider the split in the leave vote, the majority of people are actually for staying in the European Union, which is why we need a people's vote.

Peter Grant

The referendum was a choice between one very definite answer on one side and an infinite number of possibilities on the other. One of my hon. Friends said at the time, "We know people have voted to leave, but we have no idea where they have voted to go." The Prime Minister quickly shut down that discussion by defining what people had decided to do, and then she has the cheek to tell us that we are somehow being anti-democratic if we think perhaps the 17.5 million people voted for something else.

Deidre Brock

Does my hon. Friend agree that the first EU referendum was won on a tissue of lies, undeliverable promises and illegalities and that we should undo the rough wooing of the Brexit referendum and rededicate the decision to the people?

Peter Grant

There is no doubt at all that the EU referendum, as well as having the biggest participation of UK citizens in any democratic test, was also the most corrupt and most dishonest there has ever been and, I sincerely hope, we will ever see. Revelations are still coming out, even today, about the illegalities, some of which I suspect will never be brought to account. The penalties imposed on those who corrupt the democratic process are puny compared with what happens to a person who is found to have attempted to corrupt the full course of justice, so there is clearly a question that has to be addressed in future legislation.

We know that the calamitous effects of no deal are not what the majority of leave voters voted for.

Tom Brake

Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Grant

Not just now.

It is not what they were promised either in the Government's information or by the leave campaign. It is not what they voted for, and I believe it is the absolute duty of this Parliament and of this Government to make sure it is not what they get. It would be an unpardonable dereliction of duty for the Government, or anyone else, deliberately to use the procedures of this House in such a way as to maximise the danger of the worst possible outcome, the least-favoured outcome, simply because it is the only conceivable way to deliver an outcome that the Prime Minister has decided she wants but which practically nobody else in this Parliament wants.

In the past few days, as was mentioned earlier, a number of Conservative MPs have said publicly that they are likely to resign the party Whip if it looks as though the Prime Minister is herding us towards a no-deal Brexit. I would not want to see anyone put in that position.

I have respect for a number of Conservative MPs—for most Conservative MPs, in fact—even though I disagree with them, and I do not think any of them will hand back their party card easily or with a light heart, but think about it. It would not need many more Tory MPs to do that before suddenly, even with the Democratic Unionist party, the Government no longer have a working majority. There is already a motion of no confidence in the Government on the Order Paper, and it would take only one signature on that motion, and a few more people in the Conservative party to decide to put the countries of this Union before narrow party advantage, and suddenly the entire Government, not just the Prime Minister, would find that their jackets were on the shooghest of shoo gly nails. That might be what concentrates minds, which would be welcome, but what does it say about the state of British politics when hundreds of thousands of other people's jobs can be sacrificed by the Cabinet for an ideologically driven hard Brexit but a threat to their own jobs suddenly makes them sit up and take notice?

Ultimately, whatever voting procedure the Government decide to use whenever, if ever, we get to that vote, Parliament will be faced with a choice between two final options, and no deal cannot be one of them. Think about what happens in, to take a random example, a Conservative party leadership election. I understand that quite a few Conservative Members had reason to check the rules recently. If there are more than two candidates, they go through a series of eliminations, with the least supported candidate dropping off at the end of each round and the election finishing with a run-off between the two most supported candidates.

If that process is good enough to pick a temporary, sometimes extremely temporary, leader of the Conservative party, why cannot we do it for the most important peacetime decision these islands have ever taken? If we did that, no deal would be off the table before we started, which would ease a lot of the concerns that the Government are now quite deliberately fuelling.

Geraint Davies

Will the hon. Gentleman then confirm his support for my European Union (Revocation of Notification of Withdrawal) Bill, which I presented yesterday? The Bill would basically rule out no deal, and unless a deal is agreed in a public vote, we would stay in the EU.

Peter Grant

I think the hon. Gentleman knows the answer to that question, because I have co-sponsored his Bill, although if I had realised that that meant I was expected to be here to speak on his Bill on Burns Day next year, I might have thought other about it.

I do not think it is acceptable, and it will be forever held up as a mark of shame on this entire Parliament, that it is left to Opposition Back Benchers to try to use procedural methods to force the Government to allow Parliament to give the decision that Parliament wants to give, rather than

trying to force Parliament to give a decision that we really do not want to give in preference to decision that we really, really do not want to give. When it comes to a decision, by whatever process, it is not acceptable, it is anti-democratic and, in terms of sovereignty of the people of Scotland and the rights of the people of Northern Ireland, it is unconstitutional to force us into a situation where no deal is one of only two deals left on the table. No deal can be ruled out and should be ruled out. For all the parroting of this and other Ministers, it is not up to Parliament to take no deal off the table by accepting an unacceptable deal. It is up to the Government to take it off the table right now by saying that no matter what happens, they will not impose it on us and on everybody else.

When it comes to a final decision, the two options available to us have to be the ones most likely to be accepted by as many MPs as possible, even if they are not supported by as many MPs as possible. I will not support anything that takes us out of the EU, but I might be willing, reluctantly, to accept something that is less disastrous than what we are faced with just now. The final choice cannot be between the Prime Minister's deal and no deal. The combined Parliament of our four nations and the citizens of our four nations must be given a choice, and that choice, if it is to be a fair choice, can only be between the Prime Minister's Brexit and no Brexit.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle)

I am not imposing this, but may I suggest that people speak for about five minutes, as I think we would then get everybody in before the end at 7?

17:46:00

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con)

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. The greatest political movement of the 20th century was undoubtedly the Labour party. It transformed that century; it came from nowhere and literally changed the landscape of this country. Its greatest Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, was educated 10 miles from where I live. So I have to ask the Labour party: what on earth is it doing at the moment? What on earth is it doing with the national interest? We have a Prime Minister who is breaking herself, duty bound to get a deal for this country that ensures we leave with a deal, yet the shadow Secretary of State is saying, "No matter what she brings back, the Opposition will reject it, but no deal is not an option." I know some Labour Members spend a huge amount of time with their constituents, but surely they are hearing their constituents say, "Look, let's just take what the Prime Minister is bringing back"—[Interruption.] That is what they are saying. They are saying, "Let's take what the Prime Minister is bringing back and let's move on as a country." I tell hon. Members that in January, when the Prime Minister presents her deal at the Dispatch Box, one that she has pursued tirelessly on behalf of this country without rest or break, and the Labour party votes against it and then says that no deal is not good enough, the people of this country will work out who is responsible for where we end up. It will not be Conservative Members; there will be a few on our Benches, but it will be Opposition Members, and they will pay the political price.

I have huge respect for the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), but he cannot camouflage his desire to see a second referendum with promises and pledges that say, "I have six tests that need to be met." He is possibly the only person who knows what those six tests are—the country has not got a clue. We then have this idea that the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), who leaves a peripatetic caravan of chaos on the Opposition Benches, could go to the EU and negotiate a better deal. This is the man who, after the poisonings in Salisbury said, "We need to go and have a chat with Putin to find out what his problems are." It is just not realistic—and the British public know it. The Labour party is playing fast and loose with this country's future.

I have not spoken in these debates. As Chairman of the Procedure Committee, I have worked tirelessly for a year and a half to ensure that both sides have a fair rub of the green. I was not going to speak today, but then I heard that there was to be another debate under Standing Order No. 24 so that the right hon. and learned Gentleman could say the same thing over and over again, which is, “Whatever deal the Prime Minister brings back, it will not be good enough, but my word—I am not going to tolerate leaving with no deal!” Why can he not be honest and just say, “I want a second referendum”? That is what he wants. He wants a second referendum. He wants to thwart the will of the people for the people. That is what the people’s vote is: “I will thwart the will of the people for the people.” It is an entirely dishonest position.

Opinion polls go up and down—they fluctuate. It will not have escaped the right hon. and learned Gentleman’s attention that my party has had a huge amount of difficulty over the past week, but this week we are four points ahead of Her Majesty’s Opposition. The reason is that the public have worked out that the Opposition are being dishonest with the truth. Members should by all means go through the Division Lobby in January and vote against the deal, but the public will not believe for a minute that it was done in the national interest. It will have been done in self-interest. The Labour party no longer cares about or knows about the national interest, and it is a disgrace. I started my speech by saying that the Labour party was the greatest political movement of the 20th century, but it is now beginning to look like a rabble.

17:51:00

Margaret Beckett (Derby South) (Lab)

I am really sorry and dismayed to have heard what the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) just said, because I have high regard and respect for him. I simply say to him that he could not be more wrong. He talked with great respect of the work that the Prime Minister has put in; she has made one catastrophic misjudgment after another and it is she who is threatening the national interest. Furthermore, she is in gross dereliction of her most serious duties as the Prime Minister. She is playing an extraordinarily dangerous game. There is every possibility that there is a risk that we will stumble into no deal.

Way back in the beginning, when the referendum result first came into being, I had hoped that there might be a deal that we could vote for that would mitigate the damage. I have been driven to the conclusion that that is not the case mostly because of the catastrophic mess that the Prime Minister has made of the negotiations. As the hon. Member for Broxbourne knows, I have conducted many negotiations myself, so I know whereof I speak. She could not have conducted it worse if she had thought for a week. The dangerous game that she is playing means that, as I said, she is risking our stumbling into a no-deal position.

I really felt for the Minister today. I am happy to say that I have never quite been in the position that he was in at the Dispatch Box, but I have been at the Dispatch Box defending a difficult case, and I felt for him because the only answer that he had to any question that anybody asked him was, “All you need to do is vote for the Prime Minister’s deal.” I suggest that he and the hon. Member for Broxbourne put that argument forward with a greater degree of caution than they have so far. My understanding—my perception—is that most people in this House do not think the Prime Minister’s deal delivers on the promises made to those who voted leave. That is one of the reasons why there is so much opposition to it, irrespective of the point of view held by different individuals.

I shall say this briefly, because I am conscious of how many people want to speak. The people who are going to vote for the Prime Minister’s deal—there will be some—are happy because they think

that they will be able to go out and say to the British people, “Those of you who voted leave, we delivered on your mandate.” I think they are going to lose, but let us say that I am mistaken and they win, and they get this deal through, or some variety on the theme of this deal. I hear people talk about the Norway option, although it is far from clear to me that the European economic area has any intention of accepting Britain into membership. Let us put that aside for the moment, though and let us say that either the Prime Minister’s deal or some minor variant of it carries. What happens then? That is why I say to the hon. Member for Broxbourne that he is absolutely wrong about the national interest. What happens then is that people will see that there are still high levels of immigration; they will see that we are still making payments to the European Union; they will see that we still have a link to the European Court; and they will see that we are still bound by the rules and regulations of the European Union, although we no longer have any voice in deciding what they are. Perhaps most of all, they will see that one of the Prime Minister’s simplest promises—vote for my deal and it will all be over—could not be less true. It will not be over; it will barely have begun. The worst and the most difficult of the negotiations will still be to come, and that will rumble on for years and years.

I will tell the hon. Gentleman why he is wrong about where the national interest lies. Anybody who thinks longer than perhaps a month or so, or six months, beyond the date of decision should think about this very hard: I suspect that the greatest possible disillusion will come if the Prime Minister’s deal, or something like it, goes through, because then people will find out that they are in the circumstances that her deal leaves us in. I cannot think of anything more likely to make people utterly disillusioned with politics and politicians than realising that they have been told, or promised, “Oh, it’s alright, we voted for this. We have left the European Union”, when it does not mean any of the things that they thought it would mean. I entirely agree with the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant). I have been driven to the view that what we should do in the national interest—it is the only thing to do in the national interest—is to delay article 50, to put in place procedures for a people’s vote, because it is right for it to go back to the people, and to suggest that we leave it to them but to say that we should stay in the European Union.

The Prime Minister has talked today, as she so often does, of the duty and responsibility of hon. Members when she is in complete dereliction of her own duty. I say that the biggest duty that any of us has is to tell people the truth and it is time that we got on with it.

17:56:00

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con)

It is a great honour to follow the right hon. Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett).

We are living in the most serious of times, and I think that that is very clear to all of us. What we are discussing today is of such great import that there should be a reaching out across the Front Benches, as I have said in this place more than once. It is incumbent on the Government to do that and it is also incumbent on the Opposition to do that.

I will largely restrict my remarks to why I believe that no deal should not and must not happen—indeed, I was one of those who signed the letter co-signed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey). A no deal would cause such grave disruption to the businesses in my constituency in the west midlands and further afield.

Let us just look at what no deal means. No deal means going on World Trade Organisation terms. These have been lauded in some quarters. I disagree. I have been involved in international trade for

most of my working life. Yes, the WTO provides the lowest common denominator for world trade. It provides for nothing more than that. Those who think that a country such as the United Kingdom will thrive on World Trade Organisation terms, which no other major country thinks are anything like sufficient, are deluded. Indeed, no other country of our size has World Trade Organisation membership without several other additional agreements, whether it is with China, the United States or wherever. They all have agreements with their neighbouring countries for a start.

Let us look at what World Trade Organisation means on a day-to-day basis: it means tariffs. We do not have tariffs with the European Union at the moment, but it will mean tariffs. Much more importantly, it will mean the non-tariff barriers that have already been mentioned, whether that is phytosanitary inspections, veterinary inspections and other types of inspections of borders. I, along with colleagues from the Exiting the European Union Committee, have seen what happens at Dover. It is a smooth flow of trucks through the port—one every few seconds. A slight delay, which we have seen for other reasons, causes massive back-ups. This is simply not possible, and that will happen at other ports as well.

World Trade Organisation terms would also mean that we would have to deal with the separation of the quotas that we have as part of the European Union. This will not be easy. For instance, New Zealand has questions about how its quota of lamb to the European Union will be divided between the UK and the EU27. We will not have the benefit of the 40 free trade agreements that cover about 70 different countries, unless they are rolled over. It is going to be difficult enough to roll all those over if we sign the withdrawal agreement; if we do not, it will be next to impossible and I do not believe that we have the capacity or time to do that. And that is just for goods.

For services, World Trade Organisation terms would mean a very basic agreement. Whatever has been said about the failure of the European Union to complete the single market in services, it is nevertheless a much better market for services than WTO rules.

Tom Brake

Does the hon. Gentleman, like me, struggle to some extent with those who advocate falling back on World Trade Organisation rules, because they then talk about very comprehensive free trade agreements that in many ways seek to replicate the European Union?

Jeremy Lefroy

The right hon. Gentleman is precisely right. We would be going back several steps only to try to come forward a few steps.

Let me turn to the new trade agreements. Members have already mentioned how difficult it will be to negotiate the new agreement with the European Union. I agree, but I think it will be possible and it will be an excellent agreement. That is why I am going to support the Prime Minister when it comes to the vote in January. However, let us just think about how much more difficult it will be to negotiate that new agreement if we go without a deal. In effect, relations will have broken completely between the United Kingdom and the European Union. There will be so many other things to have to deal with that the prospect of negotiating a new trade agreement will be at the bottom of the agenda for the European Union and, to be frank, for the UK because we will be dealing with so many other things. The idea that if we come out with no deal, there will somehow be a possibility of negotiating a quick free trade agreement with the European Union to replace the great agreement that we have at the moment is ludicrous. It will not happen. It will be easier for us if we leave with the deal that is on the table.

I will very gently refer to the remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), because I do actually agree with him about the approach of the Labour party. I fully respect the position that the official Opposition are taking, but hon. Members should look at the Labour party's 2017 manifesto and at the withdrawal agreement. With the exception of the Labour party's manifesto saying that a customs union should be left on the table—if I am quoting it correctly—there is very little difference between this agreement and the manifesto that the Labour party stood on in 2017. That is why I urge both Front Benches to talk. This matter is too important for us to have a line right down the middle. It is incumbent on both sides to talk.

18:03:00

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op)

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who in many ways encapsulates the voice of reason on the Government Benches. I only wish that voice had been more prominent and had prevailed at an earlier stage in the negotiations.

I support my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) in this approach, but we have to recognise that we are now engaged in one of the most dangerous and difficult exercises in parliamentary brinkmanship possible. Looking at the way in which the Prime Minister has conducted these negotiations and the measures that have been announced overnight, it is difficult to come to any other conclusion than that the Prime Minister is trying to drive us towards a situation where Parliament has to make a choice between a bad deal and a disastrous one. If the Prime Minister were genuinely to start to take the necessary measures to avoid a no deal Brexit, it would have been necessary to take them two years ago. As my right hon. and learned Friend has made quite clear, it is actually too late to get the necessary infrastructure and the measures that would be required for a no deal situation.

What we have now is something that is profoundly damaging—above all, damaging to businesses and to the economy that is sustained by them.

Wera Hobhouse

Is it not absolutely necessary that the Government now knock these Brexit fantasies on the head and do not continue to give hope or the impression to the people of this country that something is possible when it is clearly the most damaging thing that this country could face?

Mr Bailey

Yes. I am going to come to that in a moment.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab)

Does my hon. Friend agree with me and the north-east chamber of commerce that no deal would be disastrous for our economy, that WTO rules would make it much more difficult for our businesses to be able to compete in Europe, and that we in this Chamber should be doing everything possible to stop no deal happening?

Mr Bailey

I completely agree. I presume that Members in all parts of the House have been lobbied by representatives of the manufacturing sector. Living in a manufacturing constituency, I have had an awful lot of lobbying, and I am yet to come across any trade association or any representatives of individual companies who think that the no deal scenario is anything but a disaster.

Looking at those who seem to want a no deal scenario, I would divide them into two categories. There are the no deal deniers—those who still try to perpetuate the myth that this is all the politics of fear and that none of these things will really happen. The fact is that this is not something being generated by politicians to pursue a particular political objective—it is the words of people who have invested in companies; who make the decisions on which the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of our electors depend; and who will have to implement the decisions and deal with the measures that will have to be taken if a no deal scenario actually occurs. They cannot be disregarded. There is also the myth perpetrated by Government Members that the compromise withdrawal deal that is being promoted by the Prime Minister is somehow a way forward. Certainly, some businesses have said that we should go for it on the basis that it at least buys them a bit of time before the disaster hits them. However, there is nothing in the withdrawal deal that satisfies me that that disaster would not occur.

Today, literally just before I walked into the Chamber, I had an email from a business in my constituency involved in the motor supply industry. It says:

“If we leave the EU with May’s proposed deal we will have access to the European Single Market, but no say in the development of its rules. The automotive sector is bound by enormous amounts of rules governing safety and environmental issues which constantly change. There can be no doubt that our competitor nations will use their very best endeavours to use these rules to their advantage and our disadvantage. All of the main automotive companies in the world have made it plain that they have no interest in investing in a UK that is outside the EU. May’s proposed deal would therefore lead to the decline and eventual disappearance of our industry in the UK.”

I think that is the authentic voice of the small businesses involved at the sharp end of our manufacturing sector.

No deal is also a disaster for our public finances, with £2 billion being spent on preparatory measures. What could we have spent that £2 billion on? There are so many better alternatives—I will not go into them now, but that did not come out in the course of the referendum debate. It also disregards the personal hardship, worry and concern for literally hundreds of thousands of people involved in businesses who have to face Christmas without knowing what the outcome of these negotiations will be and the potential impact on their personal finances.

It all could have been different. People have talked about the Prime Minister’s determination and sense of public duty. I agree that she has it, but that does not alter the fact that we are where we are because of the series of disastrous personal and political positions that she took. Her rhetoric at the Tory party conference was hardly that of a person who wanted to sensibly negotiate with a body such as the EU. There was also the announcement of the red lines, the opposition to Parliament having a say on the withdrawal agreement—something that was actively fought for and grabbed by this Parliament—and the constant pandering to the no deal deniers or ideologues on the Government Benches. That is not symptomatic of someone who wanted to reach out and come to an agreement, which I think was possible at one stage.

We only have to look at the vote on triggering article 50 to realise that there was a consensus on both sides of the House at a given time that we had to go forward and respect the will of the people. I have been a remainer and a pro-European all my life, but I voted to trigger article 50 because I respected the view of the people and thought it was necessary to try to implement what they wanted. Equally, as a representative of an important manufacturing constituency, during these negotiations I could not disregard the interests of those companies and the people who work in them, which seem to have been disregarded by the Government’s policies.

This Government's policy must be to state quite categorically that their overriding political objective is to avoid no deal and that they will take whatever measures necessary, including extending article 50 or talking to Opposition Members to see what sort of deal can be done, to ensure that we do not come out with no deal. I will conclude with a quote from the same manufacturer who contacted me just before I came here today. He says:

"Neither my employees nor I will easily forgive anyone in parliament if this disaster is not stopped before it is too late."

Only the Government can stop it, and they can only do that by making it quite clear that no deal is not an option.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing)

Order. Having just come into the Chair and counted how many Members wish to speak, I am somewhat shocked. Mr Deputy Speaker said that five-minute speeches would be about right because he had an indication that a large number of Members wished to speak. Something must have been said of which I am unaware that has made nine Members decide they have nothing to say after all. I do not know whether the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) will consider that a victory. Members might be a little surprised that the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) spoke without interruption from me for 10 minutes instead of five. I calculate that if Members speak for approximately six to seven minutes, everyone who wishes to speak will have the opportunity to do so. It is nice to see the House behaving so well and so honourably. I hope that it will continue to do so and that I will not have to introduce an official time limit.

18:14:00

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab)

Before I came into the House this afternoon, I, together with other north-east MPs, received a letter from the chief executive of the North East Chamber of Commerce. It is entirely apposite to the subject of this debate about the failure of the Prime Minister to bring the deal to the House and about our being able to have a vote on the deal.

The letter is absolutely to the point because it talks about the risk for manufacturing in the north-east of a no deal Brexit and the impact it will have on businesses. It talks about the need for businesses to have certainty about what is happening so that they can plan their businesses and be clear about what is needed to ensure they go forward positively in the future.

The first thing the letter talks about is the need for preparedness, which again is part of the discussion here today. The concern is that the advice from the Government and the measures being taken, which were announced yesterday, are actually too late for some, while others already have things in hand. There is a real concern about the lack of business preparedness.

It is above time that this House had the chance to have a vote on the Prime Minister's deal and to express a view clearly. It is something that has already been delayed two weeks, and now we are going away for Christmas, so among all the concern from businesses about what will happen, we have already lost four weeks in which we could have been making a decision. This House could have been expressing a view about how we should move forward and what should be the next steps for this House.

As I say, it is now clear that the Prime Minister cannot achieve the amendments to the legal agreements that she is seeking from Europe which might make the deal acceptable to some. I say “some” because clearly not all people will be satisfied, but it might make the deal acceptable to some who object to it at present.

I want to turn to the letter from James Ramsbotham, the chief executive of the North East Chamber of Commerce. Frankly, I was tempted to read out the whole thing as my speech because it is very appropriate. However, you will be pleased to hear, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I am just going to read a bit of it. The relevant bit is where he says:

“Firms need clarity, precision and reassurance. The longer businesses wait to understand...the future UK-EU relationship, the bigger the hit to their near-term investment, expansion and confidence. What they want is to know who they will be able to hire in future, how they will pay VAT, whether their goods will be stopped at borders, and whether the contracts they enter into will be enforceable.

One processing manufacturer said, ‘Looking at WTO tariffs of 6.5%, plus fees for shipment, plus additional staffing costs to cope with the increased admin, it quickly adds up and hinders the British market from being competitive in Europe. An Industry which overall sees 75% of its goods exported into Europe could have major issues going forward with a No-Deal Brexit’.”

He also tells us that some businesses are looking to relocate because of concerns about the future.

It is no good the Minister telling us again and again that the best way to avoid no deal is to vote for the Government’s deal, because the Prime Minister’s deal does not actually satisfy those tests. It gives us some temporary relief while other discussions go on in the future under the political declaration. It does not give business the certainty that it is looking for.

Chris Heaton-Harris
It does.

Liz Twist

Well, we are going to have to disagree about this, because clearly businesses do not feel that they have such certainty. It is really important that we get on, have a vote on the deal, have that discussion and then look at where we will go forward.

I want to say to the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) that, like him, I am getting a very heavy email postbag from my constituents with their views. They are not saying to me, “Vote for this deal”.

Mr Charles Walker
rose—

Liz Twist

If I may, I will just finish my point.

Some of my constituents are saying, “I voted for Brexit and this deal isn’t it, so vote against it”, and others are saying, “This deal is no good for us; I’m a Remainer and I want a better deal, so vote against the deal”. I would say that that is much like the divisions we have seen in this House—on the Government side as well as anywhere else.

I just want to say that it has long been time for us to get on and have the vote on this deal, and move forward to the next stage, with a better proposition and one that we can take forward.

18:19:00

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC)

Many hon. Members have focused their remarks on the impact that a no-deal Brexit would have on communities in their respective constituencies. I intend to speak in the same vein, but I shall also argue that it is the Government's responsibility to rule out such an outcome without delay.

It has been widely reported that up to £5 billion could be wiped from the Welsh economy under a no-deal scenario, which equates roughly to a reduction of some 10% of the Welsh economy. EU rules, regulation and arbitration mechanisms would no longer apply to the UK as a third country, so the current flow of trade with the EU would be constrained, as unhindered access to the single market would cease. Much of the talk about stockpiling and the sufficiency of port infrastructure to support third-country produce checks has focused on Calais and Devon, but of course the potential for disruption is just as acute in Caergybi, or Holyhead—the main port for the UK's trade with the Republic of Ireland, the UK's fifth biggest export partner.

The consequences of a no-deal Brexit for Ceredigion, which relies on the knowledge and rural economies, are just as serious. The education sector alone accounts for 20% of our economic output, sustaining some 5,000 jobs, with over 2,800 jobs directly supported by the county's two universities. The UK's ability to participate in Horizon 2020, Horizon Europe and Erasmus+—and all such schemes—will be thrown into disarray by a no-deal Brexit, and the uncertainty that will inevitably occur in such a scenario will weigh heavily on our universities' ability to recruit EU researchers and students. It is little wonder, therefore, that the chief executive of Universities UK has said:

“A ‘no deal’ Brexit would have huge implications for universities in all corners of the UK, and prove enormously damaging for regional jobs, growth and skills.”

Furthermore, agriculture is a crucial wealth and job creation industry across rural Ceredigion. It is estimated that every £1 generated in agriculture translates into some £7.40 for the local economy through supply chains and spending, and that each job in farming supports 3.5 jobs in other sectors. It will come as no surprise to Members in the Chamber that red meat—especially lamb—exports are the backbone of the agricultural industry in Wales, and we know that the single market is a vital export destination for Welsh food and drink in general. Over 80% of food and animal exports goes to the EU, and between 35% and 40% of all Welsh lamb produced. A no-deal Brexit, and the loss of access to that valuable export market, is simply unthinkable.

The Government are aware of the implications of a no-deal Brexit and the harm that it would cause to the economy. They are now also aware, thanks to the conclusions of the European Court of Justice, that they could avert such a course if ever it seemed likely. I consider it utterly inconceivable for any Government to be so irresponsible as to inflict upon their citizens the level of damage that a no-deal Brexit would cause. That is why I must pose the question again: why are the Government insisting on spending billions of pounds on no-deal preparations, throwing communities across the UK into debilitating uncertainty, when it is within their gift to rule out such an outcome?

The Prime Minister has the power to avoid a no deal by revoking or seeking an extension to article 50, as other hon. Members have rightly outlined this afternoon. I would argue that it is her duty to

rule it out now, and dissipate the harmful and unnecessary uncertainty that the mere prospect has generated.

18:23:00

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab)

It is a pleasure, as always, to follow the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake).

Theresa May's disastrous handling of the Brexit negotiations is entirely of her own making. It is she who chose to interpret a narrow victory for leave as meaning that the UK must exit the single market and the customs union; it is she who decided to call a general election in the middle of the most important negotiations in our post-war history; and it is she who utterly failed to face down the hard core of English nationalists in her party who want Brexit at any cost. In among all the chaos and incompetence, however, there is one aspect of her strategy that has become crystal clear. She has been talking up the prospect of no deal in order to bounce MPs from both sides of the House into supporting whatever deal she asks us to approve. Her game plan is simple: scare the living daylights out of Parliament by repeating ad nauseam that the choice will be between her deal and no deal at all.

It is vital that Parliament rejects the Prime Minister's scaremongering and blackmail tactics, because they are built on an empty threat. The fact is that no deal is simply not going to happen for three reasons. First, a no-deal Brexit will unleash unmitigated chaos across government, business and society. As a member of the Exiting the European Union Committee, I have heard extensive evidence from senior civil servants and business leaders about the extent to which our country is ready to absorb the shock of leaving the EU on 29 March 2019 without a deal.

Wayne David

Does my hon. Friend agree it is not simply that we would be leaving the European Union and relying on WTO trade rules? It would mean a rupture in the whole corpus of legal arrangements that have been in place for 40 years. Such a scenario is totally unthinkable.

Stephen Kinnock

I agree entirely. Let us not forget that this will impact on people's lives and citizens' rights—the rights of EU citizens in the UK and British citizens in the European Union. What will happen to the European arrest warrant? What will happen to our entire security apparatus across the EU? It is not just about trade and the WTO; it is much bigger than that.

I have been deeply impressed by the professionalism and dedication of every one of those who have come in to speak to the Select Committee to give evidence. The only conclusion that can be drawn is that they are engaged in a charade. Let us take the state of preparedness at our ports. Jon Thompson, the head of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, told us that his French counterparts have categorically refused to engage in bilateral discussions about how to plan for a no-deal exit, because bilateral contacts are not permitted under the terms of article 50. We can continue, should we wish to do so, to allow in goods from the EU at Dover without checks on 30 March, but we have absolutely no idea what the French are going to do at Calais in the event of no deal.

On our customs processes, Mr Thompson told us that there are currently 145,000 businesses across the UK who currently import or export their goods solely within the EU. Thanks to our membership of the customs union, not one of those businesses ever has to complete a customs declaration form because all the checks are done at the point of departure—that is, at the relevant factories, warehouses and farms. If we exit without a deal, every one of those businesses that wishes to

continue trading with the EU will need to know how to complete a range of complex customs declarations. According to Mr Thompson, however, to date only 2% of the 145,000 have contacted the HMRC to seek guidance on what they should do in the event of no deal.

On health, Sir Chris Wormald, permanent secretary at the Department of Health and Social Care, told us that there is no clarity on reciprocal healthcare arrangements for UK citizens in the EU and EU citizens in the UK. This will end in the event of no deal. A British tourist in Paris needing medical treatment is currently entitled to full access to the French public healthcare system, but as of 30 March 2019 he or she may be required to hold a private insurance policy.

On legislation, Jill Rutter, director of the Institute for Government, told us that, in order to ensure that UK law is operable on 30 March 2019 in the event of no deal, a mountain of primary and secondary legislation would have to be passed. The Government have so far managed to pass six of the 13 currently announced Brexit Bills. Without a deal, they will need the Trade Bill to complete its passage through Parliament, along with other key Bills in areas such as agriculture and fisheries, as well as legislation to secure EU citizens' rights. And then there is the mountain of secondary legislation, with between 800 and 1,000 statutory instruments having to be passed by 29 March. Even if MPs were to start working on all this primary and secondary legislation now, it would be a herculean task but, as we are not even going to have the vote until the 15 or 16 January, there is no sign at all of this being able to be brought forward. We are in the realm of the impossible.

Peter Grant

Does the hon. Gentleman fear there is a significant risk that, just as the Government are trying to put unacceptable pressure on Parliament to accept a bad deal by holding up the threat of no deal, so, as these major and often contentious pieces of legislation come through, Parliament will be put under intense pressure to agree bad legislation without proper scrutiny just because we have to get something on the statute book in time?

Stephen Kinnock

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. This is a steamroller. The tactics and strategy are based on steamrolling, bullying, blackmail and holding a gun to Parliament's head. The purpose of this debate is to show that Parliament will not have it. We will not be bullied. We will not be presented with a false choice. We will not be blackmailed in the way the Government are attempting. It is a constitutional and democratic outrage.

Secondly, we have no idea how the EU27 would react to a no-deal exit, but draft legislation recently tabled by the French Government contains this sentence:

“In case of withdrawal of the UK from the EU without agreement, British nationals and their family members currently residing in France would be staying illegally”.

This leaves little room for doubt as to the mindset of member states' Governments or the profound challenges that would be created for the British Government and for British citizens and businesses.

Thirdly, but not least, it is absolutely clear that there is no parliamentary majority for no deal. It is equally clear that it is impossible that the Government could consider a no-deal exit without the support of Parliament for such a course of action. The conclusion is, therefore, that a no-deal Brexit is simply not on the cards, and a responsible Government would be making that statement clearly today.

As no deal is not going to happen, and given that the Prime Minister's deal is dead in the water, it is finally becoming clear, I hope, that there is an option that can bring Parliament together and get us through this difficult time. It is an option I have been talking about for two years now—many of my hon. Friends and colleagues from across the House will be sick to death of me banging this drum, but I will continue to do so. An EFTA-EEA-based Brexit combined with a customs union—otherwise known as the Norway-plus option—is the only option that resolves the Irish border issue and protects the jobs and livelihoods of the people we were elected to represent. It is the only option that I believe can command a cross-party parliamentary majority and which has a hope of reuniting our deeply divided country.

It is vital that Parliament hold its nerve. This is not a choice between the Prime Minister's deal and no deal, because no deal is simply not going to happen; this is a choice between the Prime Minister's deal and the right deal; it is a choice between caving in to the Prime Minister's empty threats and scaremongering and standing up for the interests of our constituents; it is a choice between capitulating to a bully and asserting our sovereignty. I am confident that when the time comes Parliament will step up and do what is right for the country.

Mr Charles Walker

On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it not the case that, when the Speaker or Deputy Speaker stands up, the Member sits down?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing)

I was trying to prove this evening that this House can behave exceptionally well, and that is why I did not interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but I think he has got the hint, given that I am on my feet, that he has exceeded the time I hoped he would take, although as I have not applied a formal time limit, I cannot stop him. The hon. Gentleman, however, being an hon. Gentleman, has now resumed his seat.

18:33:00

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op)

What we are witnessing is the most expensive hoax in history. Some £2 billion is being wasted preparing for a no-deal situation that would have a catastrophic impact on our economy: medicine and food shortages; an economy 10% smaller; £6 billion in tariffs—£2.1 billion on vehicles alone, £1.6 billion on food, £1.1 billion for metals, and so it goes on. The million diabetics who depend on insulin will be put at risk. We have heard about radioisotopes. This cannot be a serious proposition from a serious Government. The idea that we should face this catastrophe unless we accept a botched deal that nobody wants is completely unreasonable.

Let me turn to this botched deal. People voted, quite reasonably, for more money, more jobs and more trade, and for control of migration and their laws. All that sounds quite reasonable. It would be reasonable to vote for it, and I would not knock anyone for doing so. The problem is that the people who did vote for those things are not getting any of them in this deal. It is therefore reasonable for them to reject it, and reasonable and proper for them to have the right to reject it in a public vote.

Some people say, "Oh well, they voted this way, and if we force them to have another vote, they will be terribly angry." They will be much more angry when they lose their jobs and their livelihoods. Many people I speak to in Swansea say, "I voted leave, but I did not vote to leave my job." Some 25,000 people in Swansea Bay rely on EU exports. They are critically worried about

tariffs and constraints even within the proposed deal, because we will not be part of the single market.

In my 2017 election manifesto—my personal promises to Swansea—I pledged to do my utmost to ensure that we were in the single market in order to avoid those problems, and give the people the right to have the final say on whether they wanted the deal. My share of the vote went up by 50%, to 60%. It was the highest Labour share in history: higher than the one in 1945 and higher than the one in 1997, without there even being a Labour Government. It was a leave area, but people have changed their minds because they have seen the facts, as any rational person would. The irrationality is on the part of the Government who say, “That is what they thought two years ago before they knew the impacts, so we must force-feed them.” People who ordered a steak and got a bit of chewed-up bacon still have to eat it, which is completely ridiculous.

Under the Prime Minister’s deal—I am not talking about the catastrophic gun that the Government are holding to our heads, and I know that the Prime Minister has tried her best to do what she can—we will end up as a rule-taker rather than a rule-maker. There will not be less migration; it will merely be from further afield, and culturally different. There will not be more trade; there will be less trade, because we will not have the collective leverage of the EU to negotiate with China, with Donald Trump, or with any other large market. When it comes to all the bilateral trade deals, anyone in their right mind, whether from Uruguay or Chile or from South Korea, will say, “Hold on: we are negotiating with a single country rather than a collective. We want a better deal.” We will have worse terms and worse trade, less money and fewer jobs. People do not want that.

Some say, “People will be very angry if we have a people’s vote.” People will be absolutely enraged if they find that they are much poorer, with poorer jobs, because we forced through a botched deal—although obviously it is not the catastrophe that is now being said to be the choice. That is why yesterday I presented a Bill proposing that we revoke article 50 if this place cannot agree on a deal that is then ratified by the public. That would enable us to stay where we are, in the status quo, in the EU, and that is what businesses want.

People may talk about parliamentary democracy, but parliamentary democracy involves a duty of care to our citizens. I have been saying, on behalf of Swansea, “We want a vote, and we want to stay in the single market at least, as well as the customs union.” My constituents have endorsed that. They have not said, “Oh no, this is terrible”, because they expect me to think about these things, day in day out, which I do.

No deal would be a disaster. It should be taken off the table. It is irresponsible, and a waste of £2 billion. We should give the people the final say, and then decide what is best. Ultimately, our children and our children’s children will make a judgment on what we have done. If what we have done sets us off on a road to ruin and isolation and to be inward looking, rather than being part of a collective that espouses the values of rights, democracy and the rule of law, shared prosperity and the creation of a better world—if we choose wrongly—they will never forgive us, so let us give the people the final say.

18:35:00

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab)

It was interesting to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy)—who is about to disappear from the Chamber—talk about the perils of the World Trade Organisation. That was fascinating, because we have not really discussed the issue in the Chamber. I have heard, incidentally, that there is a potential not for sanctions, but for vetoes from other countries, such as

Russia, in trade agreements under WTO rules. I may be wrong, but that is something that I have heard, and it would be good for it to be confirmed in an intervention.

In the absence of an intervention to confirm that, I shall continue by saying that I have spent the last fortnight on the Fisheries Bill Committee preparing legislation that will see us take back control of our waters and fishing quotas, and hopefully help regenerate coastal towns such as Hartlepool.

Fishermen and fisherwomen were among the most vociferous pro-Brexit voters. They saw it as an opportunity to tip the balance back in our favour and limit access to our seas by non-UK trawlers. That is the point: it is all about rebalancing—escaping the shackles of the common fisheries policy, but not destroying our trade links with the EU. A hard Brexit threatens that for our fishing industry, and will potentially lead to untold damage to businesses up and down the UK.

We should have had a meaningful vote last week so that we could get on with the job of thrashing out an alternative—an alternative that would protect jobs, businesses, the environment and the flow of goods across our borders after we leave the EU. We have a mere 100 days before we leave the EU; the clock is ticking fast, yet the Government are dithering and withering and wasting precious time. As has been said, kicking the can down the road resolves nothing. Setting aside £2 billion to prepare for a no-deal is a tremendous waste of money—money that could help prevent my council from raiding its reserves to make ends meet; money that could be put back into public health budgets in my constituency which have been severely cut and redirected to the leafy suburbs of the south; money that could be put back into education and save our struggling schools in Hartlepool; and money that could be better used to end the blight of poverty and homelessness. In Hartlepool, the Trussell Trust food bank has handed out more than 27,000 meals in the last 11 months.

Brexit is a brave step into the unknown, but my constituents voted to take that step in the referendum. They did so in the expectation that things would be better and the prospects more prosperous for our country. They did not expect to be worse off, to be cut off and to lose jobs and businesses. That is why we need urgently to get beyond the meaningful vote. Let Parliament take back control and get us out of this mess.

18:42:00

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab)

I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) on securing this important debate.

We find ourselves in an historic situation as a country and as a democracy. Our country faces the real possibility of leaving the European Union in March 2019 without a deal having been reached in the negotiations. The consequences of such a scenario for trade, jobs, living standards, workers' rights and the integrity of our country would be both profound and devastating, and we have a Government who are riding roughshod over our democracy by the way they are treating this Parliament. This Government were the first to be found in contempt of Parliament in modern times, and they continue to refuse to put their Brexit deal to a vote of this House. Taxpayers' money is being wasted by this House and this Prime Minister by her touring Europe.

The Prime Minister insists that her deal is the best on the table for Britain, yet she continues to refuse to bring it to this House for a vote. That does not suggest to me that the Prime Minister has strong confidence in the contents of the deal. If she really believed that this is the best deal, she would be prepared to make the case for it in a meaningful debate and vote in this House.

I can remember the times when the Prime Minister repeatedly told the country that no deal was better than a bad deal. Now she tells the country that a bad deal is better than no deal—and this is indeed a bad deal. It fails to protect jobs and living standards. It offers no guarantees that workers' rights, environmental standards and consumer protections will not be put at risk. It threatens the integrity of the United Kingdom, due to the backstop that is meant to prevent a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The nature of that backstop, and the inability of the UK to leave it unilaterally, would turn our country into Hotel California. We could check out any time we liked, but we could never leave.

The Prime Minister has brought about some rare unity in the House. She has united Members from across the party divide against her deal. When it finally comes to the House for a vote, I am confident that it will be rejected. What worries me is that the Government continue to rule out the prospect of a no-deal Brexit that the Government's own analysis has shown would be devastating for the economy. They should provide certainty for businesses, workers and communities by taking the option of no deal firmly off the table.

My constituents want an end to the political games that are being played in this House. They do not want the Prime Minister's botched deal, which fails to protect jobs, living standards and workers' rights. They do not want the European Research Group's hard Brexit, which would devastate our economy, and they do not want the political opportunism of the Scottish National party, which seeks to use Brexit as its latest grievance to push for a second independence referendum. They want a Government who can negotiate a Brexit deal that unites the country and delivers a fairer Britain.

Alex Chalk

The hon. Gentleman's Front-Bench spokesman has said that it is highly unlikely that the Government will get meaningful changes to their deal. Does the hon. Gentleman seriously think that the European Union, which has quite a lot of other things to think about, is going to contemplate any sort of radical, root-and-branch completely different deal that his party might come up with before the end of March?

Hugh Gaffney

I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question, because I was just about to go on to talk about a Labour Government.

A Labour Government will negotiate a strong single market deal and permanent customs union with the EU to protect our trade, jobs and living standards. A Labour Government will guarantee workers' rights, environmental protections and consumer standards. A Labour Government will guarantee the rights of EU nationals living in this country, who contribute so much to our public services and society. We will address the underlying causes of Brexit by investing in our communities, tackling low pay, ending precarious employment and ensuring that our public services are run for people, not for profit.

I will finish up now, as it would be unfair to the next speaker to carry on. I reiterate the call that I put to the Prime Minister in the House last week: recognise that you have failed to deliver a Brexit deal that delivers for working people; recognise that you no longer command the confidence of the country; and give the people the opportunity to elect a Labour Government by calling a general election, so that we can get to work for the many people looking on at this Tory pantomime and this shambles of a Government.

18:47:00

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab)

It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), and I thank him for his courtesy.

This is not a Noel Edmonds game show. The Government are playing politics with Brexit. They are playing on people's fears, and they have created a hoax that will divert huge resources away from frontline services this winter. The Chancellor has said that at least £4.2 billion has been set aside for no-deal planning since 2016. That is a grotesque waste of taxpayers' money on something that will not happen, that does not need to happen and that Parliament must not allow to happen. How much extra help would that £4.2 billion buy for the NHS? How many extra police and how much extra help for our schools would it buy? And that £4.2 billion is only the Government spend. The increased costs now for our businesses do not bear thinking about.

Why am I so confident that a no-deal Brexit does not need to happen? When the Government were negotiating with the EU27, they took a negotiating position about no deal, using the slogan "no deal is better than a bad deal". That was the negotiating position taken by the Government to try to negotiate the best possible deal with the EU, but the negotiations concluded. The Prime Minister and the EU signed off on an agreement. This is the final deal, according to the Prime Minister. She said as much when she opened the debate that was concluded prematurely.

Given that an agreement has been signed off, pending the approval of the UK Parliament and the European Parliament, why is no deal still being touted as an option? It is there for one reason only: the Prime Minister wants to bully Members across the House into voting for her deal. It is a deal that businesses tell me will lead the UK into a blind Brexit, when nothing about our future has been nailed down. It is a deal that does not give us access to the European Medicines Agency, which gives patients access to cancer drugs six months earlier. The Minister shakes his head, but the deal says that there is an aspiration to join the European Medicines Agency; it does not nail anything down. It is a deal that leaves us following EU rules without having any say in them. It is a national humiliation. We will not be bullied, and we do not want to vote for the Prime Minister's deal.

The Prime Minister could easily rule out no deal herself. If the House was allowed to vote on the matter, no deal could easily be ruled out. There was even an amendment to the motion that was pulled that would have ruled out a no-deal Brexit. The Government are wasting so much money on something reckless that could be stopped now. And now Parliament is going into recess—18 days off at time of national crisis, when we could be sorting this out.

Why are the Government not allowing Parliament to vote on this now? It is simply because they are trying to escalate the crisis. What responsible Government allow a crisis to develop just to bully MPs? What responsible Government spend millions on fridges for political reasons? What responsible Government, for political reasons, allow businesses to escalate their planning for no deal, which is likely to include making people redundant? Whether people voted to leave or to remain back in 2016, nobody voted for this. A no-deal Brexit was not on the ballot paper and it was not in the prospectus.

I believe that there is only one sensible way out of this crisis: Parliament must be allowed immediately to rule out a no-deal Brexit, without going into recess. Parliament must be allowed, the day after new year's day—when everyone else goes back to work—to vote on the deal. When Parliament votes against the Prime Minister's bad deal, as it will, we must revoke the article 50 notice and give the people the final say. This would be the first chance the public have had to vote on EU exit while being in possession of all the facts needed to make the decision. We need a people's vote with an option to stay in the EU.

I represent Stockton South in the north-east of England, an area with significant inequalities, in need of investment and massively dependent on our relationship with the EU: 57% of the north-east's trade is with the EU. Our area stands to lose the most from a no-deal Brexit—16% less growth, according to the reports that the Government did not want us to see. North-east businesses are pleading with MPs to rule out a no-deal Brexit. The North East England chamber of commerce, as my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) said, wants us to stay in the single market and in the customs union to protect jobs. A no-deal Brexit is an existential threat to the NHS. The Government should stop playing politics with Brexit, immediately rule out no deal and give us a meaningful vote without delay.

18:54:00

Keir Starmer

This has largely been a good debate, with clear and powerful points being made on both sides of the House on which we all need to reflect.

Despite the Minister's valiant attempts, he was not convincing in his defence of the preparations for no deal. No deal is not viable and not credible, and if that is true, it will not serve the Government's intended purpose in bringing this to a binary choice, and we should not be wasting money on it. No deal should be taken off the table, and then we could have a sensible discussion about what happens next.

A lot was said by the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) about the national interest. I will not sink to misrepresenting his views, even though he sank to misrepresenting mine.

Mr Charles Walker

I am really fascinated to know what deal the right hon. and learned Gentleman would accept from the Prime Minister.

Keir Starmer

I have said for months on end that—

Mr Walker

What deal?

Keir Starmer

If the hon. Gentleman listened, he might actually understand what I have been saying for month after month and not sink to mispresenting my view. I have argued for a permanent customs union and a single market deal. I have bothered to go to Brussels over two years to discuss whether that is viable, and I would not have proposed it if I did not think it viable. That is something I have done over and above what he has done.

Mr Walker

That is not Great Britain but little Britain.

Keir Starmer

I really think the hon. Gentleman should not embarrass himself any further.

What is not in the national interest are the red lines that the Prime Minister agreed not with her Cabinet, and not even with this House, but with a group of three or four people in the autumn of

2016. We have all had to live with those red lines ever since, and we have had no say. That was not in the national interest.

It was not in the national interest to push Parliament away at the beginning of the process, perhaps recognising that, in the end, we would have to reach consensus. It was not sensible to push Parliament away after the snap general election of 2017, when it was obvious that what is happening now would happen. It was not in the national interest never to reach across to the Opposition. It was not in the national interest to take as long as until June 2018 to come up with the Chequers proposal.

Every time I had debates and discussions with people in the EU27 before June, they said, “What is your Government trying to achieve. We don’t even know that.” That was not in the national interest, and it was not in the national interest to propose a Chequers deal that, hopelessly, was not accepted even by Conservative Members and that was immediately rejected by the EU. That is the central concern.

The reason why we are talking about the backstop and an additional transition is that the future relationship is so hopelessly underdeveloped. Nobody here and nobody in Europe thinks for a moment that the future relationship will be ready for January 2021. It is another of those myths that we have had for two years. It is not going to happen, which is why there is great anxiety about the backstop.

A backstop in which England, Wales and Scotland are out of the single market will have repercussions, and having a future relationship that is so blind that we do not know whether it might be economically close or distant is not something that any responsible Opposition could vote for.

It was not in the national interest to resist a meaningful vote. We are now all enjoying the fact that we will have a meaningful vote in January, but we would not have had it if Opposition Members, and some Conservative Members, had not voted for it. I do not know whether the hon. Member for Broxbourne did. I think he probably voted against it, voting not to have a say, not to have this debate and not to have the chance to have a say—just wave it through.

Mr Charles Walker

It is because of my Committee that Parliament has the meaningful vote.

Keir Starmer

I asked whether the hon. Gentleman voted for it.

Mr Walker

You are being ridiculous.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing)

Order. I am determined to prove this evening that the House can be well behaved.

Keir Starmer

It was not in the national interest to resist the meaningful vote. It was not in the national interest to resist any disclosure of impact assessments, which had to be forced. It was not in the national interest not to disclose legal advice that was relevant but not, in truth, confidential. And it was not in the national interest to pull the vote and prevent what needs to happen next.

I have been consistent in arguing for my proposition. We have tabled amendments before the House time and again, and they have been voted down time and again through blind loyalty. Instead of a Prime Minister and a Government who are prepared to work across the House for true consensus, what is happening now among Government Members was utterly predictable at 10 o'clock, when the result of that snap election came in. At that moment, the Prime Minister should have realised and thought about the long-term prospect of getting a deal through, and that meant working in a consensual way, taking on board the proper points that have been made by Opposition Members. That is what acting in the national interest is all about.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of the Cabinet's decision to accelerate preparations for a no-deal outcome to Brexit, following the Prime Minister's failure to allow this House promptly to express its view on the Government's deal, in the light of the significant public expenditure involved.

Dr Blackman-Woods

On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Last night, a man sleeping rough on Parliament's doorstep died. This is the second time that that has happened. I know individual MPs and staff do what they can to help people, but I wonder whether you are aware of any strategy that Parliament might be seeking to put in place to support people who are homeless. I also wonder whether there has been any indication from Ministers that they will be making a statement on this tragedy and on their failure to address the crisis of homelessness that we see every day in our communities up and down the country.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing)

I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order and for bringing to the attention of the House the tragedy of the loss of life of someone who has been homeless and sleeping rough here. I am sure the whole House will join me in saying how sorry we are that something like that has happened. She has asked me whether I am aware of whether Ministers are likely to come forward with plans to deal with homelessness. I understand that the Secretary of State might well be coming forward with such plans, but I have no formal indication of when that might be or in what form. The hon. Lady has made some very important points, and I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench have heard them and that the Ministers with responsibility will come to know very quickly about what she has drawn to the attention of the House—if by no other means, I will make sure that they know about it. I have every confidence that Ministers will take into consideration what she has said this evening in making future plans.