

Theresa May Brexit speech to Conservative conference in Birmingham

October 2, 2016

Eighty-one days ago, I stood in front of Ten Downing Street for the first time as Prime Minister, and I made a promise to the country.

I said that the Government I lead will be driven not by the interests of a privileged few, but by the interests of ordinary, working-class families. People who have a job, but don't always have job security. People who own their own home, but worry about paying the mortgage. People who can just about manage, but worry about the cost of living and getting their kids into a good school. And this week, we're going to show the country that we mean business.

Britain is going to leave the European Union

But first, today, we're going to talk about Global Britain, our ambitious vision for Britain after Brexit. Because 100 days ago, that is what the country voted for. We're going to talk about Britain in which we are close friends, allies and trading partners with our European neighbours. But a Britain in which we pass our own laws and govern ourselves. In which we look beyond our continent and to the opportunities in the wider world. In which we win trade agreements with old friends and new partners. In which Britain is always the most passionate, most consistent, most convincing advocate for free trade. In which we play our full part in promoting peace and prosperity around the world. And in which we – with our brilliant armed forces and intelligence services – protect our national interests, our national security, and the security of our allies.

So today we're going to be hearing from David Davis, Priti Patel and Boris Johnson as we start to explain our plan for Brexit. And the country will see that the Conservative Party is united in our determination to deliver that plan.

Because even now, some politicians – democratically-elected politicians – say that the referendum isn't valid, that we need to have a second vote.

Others say they don't like the result, and they'll challenge any attempt to leave the European Union through the courts.

But come on. The referendum result was clear. It was legitimate. It was the biggest vote for change this country has ever known. Brexit means Brexit – and we're going to make a success of it.

Now of course, we wouldn't have had a referendum at all had it not been for the Conservative Party – and had it not been for David Cameron. And I want to take a moment to pay tribute to David.

I served in his Shadow Cabinet for nearly five years, and in his Cabinet for six more. I saw first-hand his commitment to public service, to social justice, and his deep love for our country. He led the rescue mission that brought confidence back to the British economy. He made sure that people on the lowest wages paid no income tax at all. And he won the right for two people who love one another – regardless of their sexuality – to marry. He has a legacy of which he – and our whole Party – can be proud. And to those who claim he was mistaken in calling the referendum, we know there is no finer accolade than to say David Cameron put his trust in the British people.

And trust the people we will. Because Britain is going to leave the European Union.

Now I know there is a lot of speculation about what that is going to mean, about the nature of our relationship with Europe in future, and about the terms on which British and European businesses will trade with one another. I understand that. And we will give clarity – as we did with farm payments and university funding – whenever possible and as quickly as possible.

But we will not be able to give a running commentary or a blow-by-blow account of the negotiations. Because we all know that isn't how they work. But history is littered with negotiations that failed when the interlocutors predicted the outcome in detail and in advance.

Every stray word and every hyped up media report is going to make it harder for us to get the right deal for Britain. So we have to stay patient. But when there are things to say – as there are today – we will keep the public informed and up to date.

So I want to use today to tell you more about the Government's plan for Brexit, and in particular I want to tell you about three important things. The timing, the process – and the Government's vision for Britain after Brexit.

The timing for triggering Article 50

First, everything we do as we leave the EU will be consistent with the law and our treaty obligations, and we must give as much certainty as possible to employers and investors. That means there can be no sudden and unilateral withdrawal: we must leave in the way agreed in law by Britain and other member states, and that means invoking Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty.

There was a good reason why I said – immediately after the referendum – that we should not invoke Article 50 before the end of this year. That decision means we have the time to develop our negotiating strategy and avoid setting the clock ticking until our objectives are clear and agreed. And it has also meant that we have given some certainty to businesses and investors. Consumer confidence has remained steady. Foreign investment in Britain has continued. Employment is at a record high, and wages are on the up. There is still some uncertainty, but the sky has not fallen in, as some predicted it would: our economy remains strong.

So it was right to wait before triggering Article 50. But it is also right that we should not let things drag on too long. Having voted to leave, I know that the public will soon expect to see, on the horizon, the point at which Britain does formally leave the European Union. So let me be absolutely clear. There will be no unnecessary delays in invoking Article 50. We will invoke it when we are ready. And we will be ready soon. We will invoke Article 50 no later than the end of March next year.

The process for triggering Article 50

Now I want to tell you a little more about the process for triggering Article 50.

The first thing to say is that it is not up to the House of Commons to invoke Article 50, and it is not up to the House of Lords. It is up to the Government to trigger Article 50 and the Government alone.

When it legislated to establish the referendum, Parliament put the decision to leave or remain inside the EU in the hands of the people. And the people gave their answer with emphatic clarity. So now

it is up to the Government not to question, quibble or backslide on what we have been instructed to do, but to get on with the job.

Because those people who argue that Article 50 can only be triggered after agreement in both Houses of Parliament are not standing up for democracy, they're trying to subvert it. They're not trying to get Brexit right, they're trying to kill it by delaying it. They are insulting the intelligence of the British people. That is why, next week, I can tell you that the Attorney General himself, Jeremy Wright, will act for the Government and resist them in the courts.

Likewise, the negotiations between the United Kingdom and the European Union are the responsibility of the Government and nobody else. I have already said that we will consult and work with the devolved administrations for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, because we want Brexit to work in the interests of the whole country. And we will do the same with business and municipal leaders across the land.

But the job of negotiating our new relationship is the job of the Government. Because we voted in the referendum as one United Kingdom, we will negotiate as one United Kingdom, and we will leave the European Union as one United Kingdom. There is no opt-out from Brexit. And I will never allow divisive nationalists to undermine the precious Union between the four nations of our United Kingdom.

The final thing I want to say about the process of withdrawal is the most important. And that is that we will soon put before Parliament a Great Repeal Bill, which will remove from the statute book – once and for all – the European Communities Act.

This historic Bill – which will be included in the next Queen's Speech – will mean that the 1972 Act, the legislation that gives direct effect to all EU law in Britain, will no longer apply from the date upon which we formally leave the European Union. And its effect will be clear. Our laws will be made not in Brussels but in Westminster. The judges interpreting those laws will sit not in Luxembourg but in courts in this country. The authority of EU law in Britain will end.

As we repeal the European Communities Act, we will convert the 'acquis' – that is, the body of existing EU law – into British law. When the Great Repeal Bill is given Royal Assent, Parliament will be free – subject to international agreements and treaties with other countries and the EU on matters such as trade – to amend, repeal and improve any law it chooses. But by converting the acquis into British law, we will give businesses and workers maximum certainty as we leave the European Union. The same rules and laws will apply to them after Brexit as they did before. Any changes in the law will have to be subject to full scrutiny and proper Parliamentary debate. And let me be absolutely clear: existing workers' legal rights will continue to be guaranteed in law – and they will be guaranteed as long as I am Prime Minister.

And in fact, as we announced yesterday, under this Government, we're going to see workers' rights not eroded, and not just protected, but enhanced under this Government. Because the Conservative Party is the true workers' party, the only party dedicated to making Britain a country that works, not just for the privileged few, but for every single one of us.

Our vision for Britain after Brexit

So that is what I want to say about the process. But I want to talk to you about the Government's vision of Britain after Brexit, our vision of a truly Global Britain. And I want to start with our vision for the future relationship we will have with the European Union.

Because, in this respect, I believe there is a lot of muddled thinking and several arguments about the future that need to be laid to rest. For example, there is no such thing as a choice between "soft Brexit" and "hard Brexit". This line of argument – in which "soft Brexit" amounts to some form of continued EU membership and "hard Brexit" is a conscious decision to reject trade with Europe – is simply a false dichotomy. And it is one that is too often propagated by people who, I am afraid to say, have still not accepted the result of the referendum.

Because the truth is that too many people are letting their thinking about our future relationship with the EU be defined by the way the relationship has worked in the past. That is understandable. We have been members of the EU for more than forty years. We have just been through a renegotiation, during which we remained members of the EU and the Government sought to keep us members of the EU.

But what we are now talking about is very different. Whether people like it or not, the country voted to leave the EU. And that means we are going to leave the EU. We are going to be a fully-independent, sovereign country, a country that is no longer part of a political union with supranational institutions that can override national parliaments and courts. And that means we are going, once more, to have the freedom to make our own decisions on a whole host of different matters, from how we label our food to the way in which we choose to control immigration.

So the process we are about to begin is not about negotiating all of our sovereignty away again. It is not going to be about any of those matters over which the country has just voted to regain control. It is not, therefore, a negotiation to establish a relationship anything like the one we have had for the last forty years or more. So it is not going to be a "Norway model". It's not going to be a "Switzerland model". It is going to be an agreement between an independent, sovereign United Kingdom and the European Union.

I know some people ask about the "trade-off" between controlling immigration and trading with Europe. But that is the wrong way of looking at things. We have voted to leave the European Union and become a fully-independent, sovereign country. We will do what independent, sovereign countries do. We will decide for ourselves how we control immigration. And we will be free to pass our own laws.

But we will seek the best deal possible as we negotiate a new agreement with the European Union. I want that deal to reflect the kind of mature, cooperative relationship that close friends and allies enjoy. I want it to include cooperation on law enforcement and counter-terrorism work. I want it to involve free trade, in goods and services. I want it to give British companies the maximum freedom to trade with and operate in the Single Market – and let European businesses do the same here. But let me be clear. We are not leaving the European Union only to give up control of immigration again. And we are not leaving only to return to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice.

As ever with international talks, it will be a negotiation, it will require some give and take, and while there will always be pressure to give a running commentary on the state of the talks, it will not be in our best interests as a country to do that. But make no mistake: this is going to be a deal that works for Britain.

Global Britain is in sight

But Brexit should not just prompt us to think about our new relationship with the European Union. It should make us think about our role in the wider world. It should make us think of Global Britain,

a country with the self-confidence and the freedom to look beyond the continent of Europe and to the economic and diplomatic opportunities of the wider world. Because we know that the referendum was not a vote to turn in ourselves, to cut ourselves off from the world. It was a vote for Britain to stand tall, to believe in ourselves, to forge an ambitious and optimistic new role in the world.

And there is already abundant evidence that we will be able to do just that. Important foreign businesses – like Siemens and Apple – have committed to long-term investments in this country. With the Japanese purchase of ARM for £24 billion, we have seen the biggest-ever Asian investment in Britain. Countries including Canada, China, India, Mexico, Singapore and South Korea have already told us they would welcome talks on future free trade agreements. And we have already agreed to start scoping discussions on trade agreements with Australia and New Zealand.

A truly Global Britain is possible, and it is in sight. And it should be no surprise that it is. Because we are the fifth biggest economy in the world. Since 2010 we have grown faster than any economy in the G7. And we attract a fifth of all foreign investment in the EU. We are the biggest foreign investor in the United States. We have more Nobel Laureates than any country outside America. We have the best intelligence services in the world, a military that can project its power around the globe, and friendships, partnerships and alliances in every continent. We have the greatest soft power in the world, we sit in exactly the right time zone for global trade, and our language is the language of the world.

We don't need – as I sometimes hear people say – to "punch above our weight". Because our weight is substantial enough already. So let's ignore the pessimists, let's have the confidence in ourselves to go out into the world, securing trade deals, winning contracts, generating wealth and creating jobs. And let's get behind the team of ministers – David Davis, Liam Fox, Priti Patel and Boris Johnson – who are working on our plan for Brexit, who know we're going to make a success of it and who will make a reality of Global Britain.

So let's have a great week here in Birmingham this conference. Let's get this plan for Brexit right. Let's show the country we mean business. And let's keep working to make Britain a country that works not for a privileged few but for everyone in this great country.