

HOUSE OF COMMONS HANSARD

Leaving the EU

12 February 2019

Leaving the EU

12:36:00

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May)

With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the Government's ongoing work to secure a Brexit deal that honours our commitments to the people of Northern Ireland, commands the support of Parliament, and can be negotiated with the EU.

On 29 January, the House gave me a clear mandate and sent an unequivocal message to the European Union. Last week, I took that message to Brussels. I met President Juncker, President Tusk and the President of the European Parliament, Antonio Tajani. I told them clearly what Parliament wanted in order to unite behind a withdrawal agreement—legally binding changes to the backstop—and I explained to them the three ways in which that could be achieved.

First, the backstop could be replaced with alternative arrangements to avoid a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. Yesterday my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union met Michel Barnier to discuss the ideas put forward by the Alternative Arrangements Working Group, which consists of a number of my right hon. and hon. Friends. I am grateful to them for their work, and we are continuing to explore their ideas. Secondly, there could be a legally binding time limit to the existing backstop, or thirdly, there could be a legally binding unilateral exit clause to that backstop. Given that both sides agree that we do not ever want to use the backstop and that if we did so it would be temporary, we believe it is reasonable to ask for legally binding changes to that effect.

As expected, President Juncker maintained the EU's position that it will not reopen the withdrawal agreement. I set out the UK's position—strengthened by the mandate that the House had given me—that the House needs to see legally binding changes to the backstop, and that that can be achieved by changes to the withdrawal agreement. We agreed that our teams should hold further talks to find a way forward, and President Juncker and I will meet again before the end of February to take stock of those discussions.

So our work continues. The Secretary of State and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster are in Strasbourg today, and last week the Attorney General was in Dublin to meet his Irish counterpart. Following my own visits to Brussels, Northern Ireland and Ireland last week, I welcomed the Prime Minister of Malta to Downing Street yesterday, and I will be speaking to other EU27 leaders today and throughout the week. The Leader of the Opposition shares the House's concerns about the backstop; I welcome his willingness to sit down and talk to me, and I look forward to continuing our discussions. Indeed, Ministers will be meeting members of his team tomorrow.

I think that there are a number of areas in which the whole House should be able to come together. In particular, I believe that we have a shared determination across the House not to allow the UK's

leaving the EU to mean any lowering of standards in relation to workers' rights, environmental protections, or health and safety. I have met trade union representatives and Members on both sides of the House, and my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary is leading work to ensure that we fully address all concerns about these vital issues. We have already made legally binding commitments to no regression in these areas if we were to enter the backstop, and we are prepared to consider legislating to give these commitments force in UK law. And in the interests of building support across the House, we are also prepared to commit to asking Parliament whether it wishes to follow suit whenever the EU changes its standards in these areas. And of course we do not need to automatically follow EU standards in order to lead the way, as we have done in the past under both Conservative and Labour Governments. The UK has a proud tradition of leading the way in workers' rights whilst maintaining a flexible labour market that has helped deliver an employment rate almost 6 percentage points above the EU average.

Successive Governments of all parties have put in place standards that exceed the minimums set by the EU. A Labour Government gave British workers annual leave and paid maternity leave entitlements well above that required by the European Union. A Conservative-led Government went further than the EU by giving all employees the right to request flexible working. And I was proud to be the Minister for Women and Equalities to introduce shared parental leave so that both parents are able to take on caring responsibilities for their child—something no EU regulation provides for.

When it comes to workers' rights this Parliament has set a higher standard before, and I believe will do so in the future. Indeed we already have plans to repeal the so-called Swedish derogation, which allows employers to pay their agency workers less, and we are committed to enforcing holiday pay for the most vulnerable workers—not just protecting workers' rights, but extending them.

As I set out in my statement two weeks ago, the House also agrees that Parliament must have a much stronger and clearer role in the next phase of the negotiations. Because the political declaration cannot be legally binding and in some areas provides for a spectrum of outcomes, some Members are understandably concerned that they cannot be sure precisely what future relationship it would lead to. By following through on our commitments and giving Parliament that bigger say in the mandate for the next phase, we are determined to address those concerns. The Secretary of State has written to all members of the Exiting the EU Committee seeking their view on engaging Parliament in this next phase of negotiations, and we are also reaching out beyond this House to engage more deeply with businesses, civil society and trade unions.

Everyone in this House knows that the vote for Brexit was about not just changing our relationship with the EU, but changing how things work at home, especially for those in communities who feel they have been left behind. [Interruption.] Addressing this and widening opportunities is the mission of this Government that I set out on my first day as Prime Minister, and I will continue to work with Members across the House to do everything we can to help build a country that works for everyone.

But one area where the Leader of the Opposition and I do not agree is on his suggestion that the UK should remain a member of the EU customs union. I would gently point out that the House of Commons has already voted against that, and in any case—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker

Order. There is a lot of noise and heckling, but the record shows that everyone gets a chance to question the Prime Minister. I think it is right that she should have a proper and respectful hearing, and the same courtesy must be extended to the Leader of the Opposition in due course.

The Prime Minister

First, I would gently point out that the House of Commons has already voted against that, and in any case membership of the customs union would be a less desirable outcome than that which is provided for in the political declaration. That would deliver no tariffs, fees, charges or quantitative restrictions across all sectors, and no checks on rules of origin. But crucially it would also provide for the development of an independent trade policy for the UK that would allow us to strike our own trade deals around the world, something the Labour party once supported.

On Thursday, as I promised in the House last month, we will bring forward an amendable motion. This will seek to reaffirm the support of the House for the amended motion from 29 January—namely to support the Government in seeking changes to the backstop and to recognise that negotiations are ongoing. Having secured an agreement with the European Union for further talks, we now need some time to complete that process. When we achieve the progress we need, we will bring forward another meaningful vote, but if the Government have not secured a majority in this House in favour of a withdrawal agreement and a political declaration, the Government will make a statement on Tuesday 26 February and table an amendable motion relating to the statement, and a Minister will move that motion on Wednesday 27 February, thereby enabling the House to vote on it, and on any amendments to it, on that day. As well as making clear what is needed to change in the withdrawal agreement, the House has also reconfirmed its view that it does not want to leave the EU without a deal. The Government agree, but opposing no deal is not enough to stop it. We must agree a deal that this House can support, and that is what I am working to achieve.

I have spoken before about the damage that would be done to public faith in our democracy if this House were to ignore the result of the 2016 referendum. In Northern Ireland last week, I heard again the importance of securing a withdrawal agreement that works for all the people of this United Kingdom. In Belfast I met not just politicians but leaders of civil society and businesses from across the community. Following this House's rejection of the withdrawal agreement, many people in Northern Ireland are worried about what the current uncertainty will mean for them. In this House we often focus on the practical challenges posed by the border in Northern Ireland, but for many people in Northern Ireland, what looms larger is the fear that the seamless border between Ireland and Northern Ireland that helped to make the progress that has followed the Belfast agreement possible might be disrupted. We must not let that happen, and we shall not let that happen.

The talks are at a crucial stage, and we now all need to hold our nerve to get the changes that this House requires and to deliver Brexit on time. By getting the changes we need to the backstop, by protecting and enhancing workers' rights and environmental protections and by enhancing the role of Parliament in the next phase of negotiations, I believe we can reach a deal that this House can support. We can deliver for the people and the communities that voted for change two and half years ago and whose voices for too long have not been heard. We can honour the result of the referendum, and we can set this country on course for the bright future that every part of this United Kingdom deserves. That is this Government's mission, and we shall not stint in our efforts to fulfil it. I commend this statement to the House.

12:47:00

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab)

I usually thank the Prime Minister for giving me an advance copy of her statements, but this one was handed to me just as I was leaving my office to come down here, so I can only assume that she entrusted it to the Transport Secretary to deliver it to me.

Our country is facing the biggest crisis in a generation, yet the Prime Minister continues to recklessly run down the clock. We were promised that there would be a deal last October; it did not happen. We were promised a meaningful vote on a deal in December; it did not happen. We were told to prepare for a further meaningful vote this week, after the Prime Minister had again promised to secure significant and legally binding changes to the backstop; that has not happened. Now the Prime Minister comes before the House with more excuses and more delays.

In her statement, the Prime Minister has failed to answer even the most basic questions. What progress has she made on identifying and working up the alternative arrangements? Have they been presented to the European Union? If not, when will they be presented? Will she set them out before this House and ask for its approval of them? In truth, it appears that the Prime Minister has just one real tactic: to run down the clock, hoping that Members of this House can be blackmailed into supporting a deeply flawed deal. This is an irresponsible act. She is playing for time, and playing with people's jobs, our economic security and the future of our industries.

Yesterday, growth figures showed the lowest growth since 2012 and our manufacturing sector mired in recession. The decision by Nissan last week to pull its investment from its Sunderland plant may be only the thin end of a very long wedge. Uncertainty and falling confidence in this Government's ability to deliver are putting jobs at risk. The Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will be hearing the same warnings as I am: that several major manufacturers—household names employing tens of thousands of people—are poised to follow in Nissan's footsteps.

Earlier today, we heard from the Leader of the House that the next meaningful vote may not happen until after the EU summit on 21 March—just days before Brexit is due to happen. If that is not the case, will the Prime Minister tell the House today when the meaningful vote will be? We also learned from the Leader of the House that any changes to the backstop will not be written into the legally binding withdrawal agreement. Will the Prime Minister confirm that?

Is the Prime Minister really prepared to risk people's livelihoods, jobs and investment in a desperate attempt to push her deeply flawed deal through Parliament? She has just told this House to hold its nerve. Tell that to Nissan workers in Sunderland and the thousands more worried about their job security and the future of their communities. No Minister who is serious about protecting jobs in this country would allow a Prime Minister deliberately to run down the clock and play chicken with people's livelihoods. To stand by and do nothing would be a complete dereliction of duty.

As I received the Prime Minister's letter yesterday in response to Labour's Brexit plan, it became clearer to me that the Prime Minister is merely engaged in the pretence of working across Parliament to find solutions. She has not indicated that she will move one iota away from her rejected deal or any of her red lines. On the backstop, the Prime Minister has pointed out that Labour also has concerns. But let us make no mistake about it—that has never been a major issue with the Prime Minister's deal. In order to stop the UK falling into the backstop, we need a permanent customs union and a strong single market deal. That is the key to maintaining an open border on the island of Ireland and to protecting jobs, industry and living standards in this country. That is why it is backed by businesses that employ and trade unions that represent millions of workers in this country.

To correct the Prime Minister's claim in her statement, we want to negotiate a new UK-EU customs union, as I set out in my letter. The Prime Minister says there is no need to negotiate a customs

union as her deal provides for the benefit of being in one, but I am afraid that that is simply not the case. The deal that the Prime Minister negotiated means that there will be barriers to trade in goods and there will be no frictionless trade, putting manufacturers across the country at a huge disadvantage. That is made quite clear in the political declaration when it says that

“the Parties will form separate markets and distinct legal orders”

and concedes that that

“can lead to a spectrum of different outcomes for administrative processes as well as checks and controls”.

Nothing is secured.

The Prime Minister is also trying to win support for her deal by promising to protect workers’ rights after Brexit. Well, just look at the record of the Conservatives. They attacked trade union rights through the Trade Union Act 2016. They kept this House up all night opposing the minimum wage in 1997. They are the party that introduced employment tribunal fees and the public sector pay cap. For many of them, ripping up rights is what Brexit is all about. Take the Secretary of State for International Trade, for example. He once wrote:

“It is too difficult to hire and fire and too expensive to take on new employees. It is intellectually unsustainable to believe that workplace rights should remain untouchable”.

It is no wonder that trade union leaders such as Tim Roache of the GMB and Frances O’Grady, the general secretary of the TUC, have rejected the Prime Minister’s inadequate pledges. It is also vital that we keep pace with the best consumer safeguards and environmental protections. As if the warnings of the destruction of our biodiverse natural life are not serious enough, we have to be serious about all environmental protections and indeed make them much stronger.

There is a sensible way forward, but the Prime Minister is refusing to listen. Labour’s alternative has been widely welcomed as a way of breaking the impasse by business leaders, European leaders and even some Conservative MPs, but the Prime Minister refuses to listen. I urge all Members to think about the damage that the Prime Minister’s strategy is doing—the threat to industry, unskilled jobs and communities all across this country. Now is not the time to stand idly by. Now is the time to stand up and do the right thing, to rule out no deal and to back Labour’s alternative plan.

The Prime Minister

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the announcement by Nissan, but it is important that the House recognises that Nissan has confirmed that none of the current 7,000 jobs at the plant will be lost. It remains committed to the UK and more capital will be invested in Sunderland than was originally planned in 2016. He asked me about the progress on the alternative arrangements and whether they were going to be put before the European Commission. I remind him of what I said in my statement:

“Yesterday my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union met Michel Barnier to discuss the ideas put forward by the Alternative Arrangements Working Group, which consists of a number of my right hon. and hon. Friends.”

I think that answers his question.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about Labour's proposals. I referenced the issue with the customs union in my statement, but of course he also talks about being a member of the single market. Being a member of the single market means accepting free movement and one of the things that people voted for when they voted to leave the European Union was to bring an end to free movement. That is what this Government will deliver.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the dates for votes that are going to take place in this House. I set those out in my statement as well. He referenced businesses quite a lot but, of course, businesses backed the deal—[Interruption.] They did. He talked about uncertainty but, of course, the best way to end uncertainty is to vote for a deal. He talked about running down the clock, but I wanted to have this sorted before Christmas. I brought a deal back—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker

Order. Mr Matheson, I have nurtured for a long time an ambition to see you become a statesman. I think you are threatening that prospect with these noisy gesticulations. Be calm—Buddha-like.

The Prime Minister

Thank you, Mr Speaker. The deal was negotiated before Christmas, so it is not I who is trying to run down the clock—[Interruption.] It is no good Labour Members who voted against the deal pointing their fingers across the House. Every time somebody votes against a deal, the risk of no deal increases.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about acting in the national interest. Yes, we should be acting in the national interest and the national interest is in getting a deal agreed through this Parliament. That is why we are working with the European Union in everything that we are doing.

The right hon. Gentleman made several references to the issues of businesses, the issue of jobs and protecting jobs. We are going back to deal with the issue of the backstop, but the deal that we have negotiated with the EU—the political declaration that sets out the future—is a deal that protects jobs. The one thing that we know would threaten jobs in this country would be a Labour Government.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con)

My right hon. Friend will recall that, when we served together in the Cabinet, the coalition Government were very enthusiastic about the prospect of negotiating EU trade deals with important trading partners around the world, including the prospect of a trade deal with Japan. The Japan deal was concluded on 1 February, and I think it covers a bigger proportion of the global economy than any trade deal negotiated so far. Does the Prime Minister aim to seek a customs arrangement that enables us to continue to enjoy, or to begin to get, the benefits of this important deal after 29 March, or is she insisting that we have to leave it and have our own trade policy, and begin our own negotiations with a country that has a much bigger economy than our own and is likely to demand concessions from the United Kingdom that it was not able to demand from the European Union?

The Prime Minister

My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right that the economic partnership agreement with Japan came into force on 1 February. Of course, prior to that, we had been trading with Japan on World Trade Organisation arrangements. It has been the policy of the Government, in relation to the trade deals that have been agreed between the European Union and countries around the world, that we see continuity in those agreements at the point at which we leave the European Union—we have also been working to see continuity were we to leave with no deal—but we also want to ensure that we can enhance our trade arrangements with countries around the world, and so build our own trade

agreements with those countries. The best and most sensible approach is to maintain trading relations as they are as we leave the European Union, and then build and enhance those trading relations with our own independent trade agreements.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP)

Sometimes I think the Prime Minister must live in a parallel universe. We have just heard that she wanted this concluded in December. Talk about rewriting history—it was the Prime Minister who denied us the right to have a meaningful vote. [Interruption.] She sits there laughing. Sometimes you should be honest with yourself, never mind being honest with the people of the United Kingdom.

Here we are, once again: a statement from a Prime Minister lost in a Brexit fantasy. We are 45 days from Scotland being dragged out of the European Union against our will, 45 days from economic catastrophe. She talks about Japan. Goods leaving Japan in the next few days will arrive after we leave the European Union, and we do not know what the tariff regime will be for those imported cars and training shoes, or whatever else. The ongoing mess of this Government never ceases to amaze.

Does the Prime Minister understand that EU leaders have refused to budge on any changes to the withdrawal agreement? Donald Tusk said on 6 February that the EU is not making any other offer. What does the Prime Minister not understand in that statement? Why does she not understand that the EU will not reopen the withdrawal agreement that she signed up to? Does she realise the danger of running down the clock? Forty-five days to go, and here we are with a Government who cannot even deliver a ferry contract.

Prime Minister, your response to my letter requesting sight of what economic analysis you have done on your own deal poses more questions than answers. The question is simple: have you done an economic assessment of your deal's impact on the UK economy? I want a simple yes or no.

Prime Minister, you are asking this House to vote on your deal and you cannot even be honest about the economic impact. You expect MPs to vote for this, but your binary choice is simply laughable. A growing number are calling for an extension to article 50. Extend article 50 today.

The Prime Minister's deal is a fraud. Ending freedom of movement and leaving the biggest trading bloc in the world, this will be catastrophic for Scotland. The UK is already suffering the cost of Brexit. Will she put an end to this economic madness?

Prime Minister, as students get set for university applications and as business owners look to prepare for the new financial year, your Government are causing a new wave of uncertainty. We on these Benches refuse to accept Scotland being dragged out of the European Union against our will. Ultimately, Scotland will have a choice: be an independent European nation or remain part of an inward-looking UK. Scotland's voice must be respected.

The Prime Minister

The right hon. Gentleman has been making the same points in response to my statements, regardless of their content, for some time now. He talks about the economic analysis, and we published an economic analysis of the Government's proposals.

Ian Blackford

That's not true.

Mr Speaker

Order. There is plenty of scope for disagreement about what is true and what is not true but, in fairness, I repeat the point that the person who has the floor must be heard.

The Prime Minister

Thank you, Mr Speaker. I say to the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) that, in his intervention from a sedentary position, I think he may have inadvertently misled the House on this matter.

Ian Blackford

Liar.

Mr Speaker

Order. Forgive me, but I did not hear what was said. [Hon. Members: “He said, ‘Liar.’”] I hope the word “liar” was not used. [Interruption.] Order. I am perfectly capable of handling this matter with alacrity, and I shall do so. [Interruption.] Order. If that word was used, it must be withdrawn at once without equivocation or qualification. [Interruption.] Order. If a Member on the Front Bench used that word—I am sorry, but I am not debating it, I am not arguing and I am not negotiating—it must be withdrawn at once.

I admit that I did not see which Member used the word, but I am advised on good authority that it was used by the leader of the Scottish National party. If so—I want the debate to continue, and it will—I simply ask the right hon. Gentleman to withdraw that word. He cannot accuse another Member in this House of dishonesty. Withdraw.

Ian Blackford

In courtesy to yourself, I withdraw. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker

There are plenty of precedents for that. I remember doing it once myself, and I remember a member of the shadow Cabinet, the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson), once doing it out of deference to the Chair rather than out of deference to the person whom he had been attacking. That is enough.

The Prime Minister

Thank you, Mr Speaker. To continue my explanation to the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber, the Government have put forward an economic analysis of their proposed deal. We did that in the economic analysis published before the withdrawal agreement was put before the House. In it we recognised that areas of the political declaration had not yet been confirmed and that variations in relation to the degree of friction across the border would come from that. We could have taken a very low variation, which would have been very close to the Government’s deal, and we could have taken a high variation, but we took a midpoint, which is entirely fair for the Government to do. The economic analysis shows that, if we are to honour the referendum, the deal that delivers best for the British economy is the deal that the Government have put forward.

The right hon. Gentleman also talks about putting an end to the current situation. As I have indicated, we can indeed move forward when we have agreed a deal across the House. If he is so concerned about avoiding no deal, I assume that, when a deal is brought back from the European Union, he and SNP Members will vote for it in order to support the future of the United Kingdom.

Once again, the right hon. Gentleman talks about the economic impact on Scotland of leaving the European Union and he talks, virtually in the same breath, about his view that Scotland should be independent from the United Kingdom. [Hon. Members: “Hear, hear.”] That may raise cheers on the SNP Benches, but it would not raise cheers from those people in Scotland whose economic future depends on being a member of the UK.

Mr Speaker

Order. Of course there is enormous interest, which, as per usual, I want to accommodate. May I appeal to colleagues at this time, with the country watching us, to have a robust but respectful debate? It is perfectly possible for colleagues to make their points with considerable force but to do so with courtesy. I know we will be led in this matter by a former party leader and a notably courteous right hon. Gentleman, Mr Iain Duncan Smith.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con)

May I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement, in which she referred to the successful amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady)? She will recall that its successful passage was heavily based on a thing that has become known as the “Malthouse compromise”. She has also said that this proposal was discussed yesterday in Brussels by the Secretary of State and one of the negotiators. For the avoidance of doubt, will she confirm that this proposal forms part of Government policy?

The Prime Minister

I know my right hon. Friend has been involved in the meetings that have taken place with the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, looking at the proposals that have come to be known as the Malthouse compromise. Of course, a number of alternative arrangements have been proposed over the past months. The possibility of alternative arrangements to replace the backstop is recognised by both the UK and the EU in the political declaration that was agreed in November. There are some issues and some questions in respect of the proposals that have been tabled. I raised the issue of alternative arrangements with the European Commission, European Council and European Parliament when I was there last week. As I said, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was able to discuss these issues with Michel Barnier yesterday.

As I set out in my previous statement to the House, what people across this House want to ensure is that the backstop, as it currently exists, cannot become a permanent arrangement in which the UK could find itself. There are various ways of dealing with that: as I set out in my previous statement, one is to replace that backstop completely with alternative arrangements; and another is to ensure that the backstop can never be permanent. Those are the issues that have been discussed, but I have laid Parliament’s views clearly before the EU.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD)

Now that the Prime Minister has reached out to the general secretary of Unite the Union, and to the Leader of the Opposition and his entourage, she is no doubt better informed as to how Trotsky might have dealt with the Brexit crisis. But will she elaborate a little more on her discussions with the general secretary of the TUC and its 6 million affiliated members, and the official Brexit spokesman of the Labour party, who have made it very clear that the best way to protect workers’ rights is to give workers a say on the final deal, and the option of remaining in the EU and keeping the workers’ rights they already have?

The Prime Minister

I say to the right hon. Gentleman that the issue I have discussed with trade union leaders, the secretary general of the TUC and Members from across this House is the concern to ensure that

there is no reduction in workers' rights in the UK, a commitment that this Government have given and will continue to meet.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con)

I agree with the Prime Minister, and have done for many months, that the best way to avoid a no-deal outcome to Brexit is to have a deal put in place. That is why I have been pleased, at the request of the Prime Minister, to work as part of the alternative arrangements working group. But is it not now clear that to get that agreement through the House those alternative arrangements are going to have to command the confidence of a majority of Members on this side, our confidence and supply partners, and some Labour MPs? The tenor of the Leader of the Opposition's response today shows that, unfortunately, working on a cross-party basis is unlikely to deliver a vote for the agreement and certainly not continued votes for the necessary legislation. That is the reality of the parliamentary arithmetic, isn't it?

The Prime Minister

I thank my right hon. Friend for the work she has been doing on the issue of alternative arrangements. Obviously, I want to see a deal that can get through the House, supported by all Members from my party and by our confidence and supply partners, but it is in the interests of this Parliament and of taking legislation forward to see a strong vote from across the whole House on this issue. As she has said, the tone of the response by the Leader of the Opposition did not give much encouragement on that issue, but we will continue to talk with the Labour party Front-Bench team. As I said, the Brexit Secretary and other members of the ministerial team will be meeting the Leader of the Opposition's team to take forward those discussions and to explore the issues that the Labour party wishes to raise.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab)

Although strength in pursuit of a principle is to be admired, inflexibility and denial in the face of the facts is not, especially when the future of the country is at stake. The facts are that alternative arrangements for the Northern Ireland border were examined extensively last summer and found wanting; that the EU has made it clear that it will not reopen the withdrawal agreement; that the rolling over of the trade deals that the Father of the House referred to is not going well; and that businesses are spending millions of pounds and pulling their hair out because they fear the prospect of a no-deal Brexit on 29 March. I do not believe that the Prime Minister would do that to our country. I do not think that Ministers would allow her to do it, so why does she continue to pretend that she might?

The Prime Minister

I have consistently said—and I made the point in my statement this afternoon—that what I want and what the Government want is a deal with the European Union. But there is only one way to ensure that we avoid no deal. I know I say this a lot, and I know right hon. and hon. Members should out at it and so forth, but if they do not want no deal, they have to agree a deal.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con)

My right hon. Friend is facing intransigence both from the undemocratic EU and from MPs who voted for the European Union Referendum Act 2015, the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act 2017, the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 and the repeal of the European Communities Act 1972 but who are now trying to reverse this with their own votes. She has not signed the withdrawal agreement, which itself contains undemocratic and unconstitutional features, including the backstop and article 4, which removes control over our lawmaking. If this undemocratic intransigence continues, will she therefore walk away from the negotiations?

The Prime Minister

Obviously, what we are doing now is working with the EU to achieve what this Parliament has said it wants to see achieved, notably legally binding changes to the backstop that deal with the issues that have been raised by this Parliament. I continue to work on those points, but my hon. Friend made a very important point at the beginning of his question, which is that Members from across this House overwhelmingly voted for a referendum. It was clear at the time that this House would respect the result of the referendum. The Government of the time made it clear that we would respect the result of the referendum. This House overwhelmingly voted to trigger article 50. Article 50 had a two-year timeline to it, which ends on 29 March, and this House voted for the withdrawal agreement Act. At every stage so far this House has been willing to put into place the result of the referendum. What the House now needs to do is agree a deal, so that we can leave on 29 March and progress on to the next stage of negotiations and progress on to a brighter future.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab)

The country's counter-terror chief has said that no deal would be a "very serious flaw" in our security arrangements. The police chief in charge of preparing for Brexit has said that no deal would leave us less safe. The Prime Minister and I have always previously agreed on the importance of not undermining our national security or public safety, but she knows that her continued delays have increased the risks of no deal on 29 March, so if she has failed by the middle of March to persuade this House to back a deal, is she still ruling out extending article 50—yes or no?

The Prime Minister

The extension of article 50 does not solve the problem. The only way to solve the problem of having no deal is to agree a deal. The right hon. Lady says that my delays have caused the position we are in. We are in this position because I negotiated a deal with the European Union and brought it back to the House of Commons, and the House of Commons, including Members on her side of the House, rejected that deal. We are now working to address the issue raised by the positive vote that the House of Commons gave on 29 January. That vote ensured it was clear what changes the House of Commons felt were necessary to agree a deal.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con)

We are all acutely aware that time is racing away, which is why more and more Members are saying we must extend article 50. We also need time for all the necessary legislation. Will the Prime Minister confirm that in the numerous statutory instruments being laid that are not debated, there is not one planned for next week, when some MPs may be away, committing us to zero tariffs in the event of no deal? Zero tariffs would decimate our agriculture and food industries and start a race to a bottom. Such a significant decision would have far-reaching consequences and would demand full parliamentary scrutiny.

The Prime Minister

There will be a number of statutory instruments that the House will be addressing. The House will be working hard on Brexit arrangements next week. On the issue of tariffs in the event of no deal, discussions are still being undertaken with businesses and other sectors.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab)

Further to the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), can the Prime Minister now give millions of people and businesses across the country a simple answer to this straight question: if she is faced with a choice of leaving the European Union without a deal on 29 March or seeking an extension of article 50, what will she do? We deserve to know the answer to that question.

The Prime Minister

What I am doing is working to ensure that we can bring a deal back to the House. It will then be for the right hon. Gentleman and other Members of the House to determine whether they want to support a deal with the European Union.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con)

The Leader of the Opposition and the leader of the Liberal party both implicitly criticised the UK Government's record on workers' rights in comparison to Europe. They both ignored the fundamental right of safety in the workplace, on which we have had the best record in Europe in every year since we joined, so there is little to fear in this area. Given that, will the Prime Minister guarantee to the House that any future changes in this area will be subject to the control of the House?

The Prime Minister

My right hon. Friend makes a very important point about the good record this country has on workers' rights. I can confirm that I believe we should not just be automatically following what happens in Europe in this area; we should be making those decisions, and it is important that we in this country and this House make those decisions. With our record of going further and having better workers' rights than a number of areas of the European Union, that makes sense.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP)

The Prime Minister referenced the fact that there are concerns in Northern Ireland about maintaining the seamless border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, but she should also reference, as she knows, the grave concern among many in Northern Ireland about creating new barriers between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom, given that we trade more with the rest of the United Kingdom than the Irish Republic, the rest of the EU and the rest of the world put together. Neither barrier is necessary or needed under any scenario. The Prime Minister and the House know what is needed to pass the withdrawal agreement, so will she confirm that the stance taken by Leo Varadkar—we met him in Belfast on Friday in a very cordial meeting—and others could lead to the very outcome that they say they wish to avoid?

The Prime Minister

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the concerns that have been expressed about the trading relationship between Northern Ireland and Great Britain and the issue of potential regulatory barriers. It is an issue that he and I have discussed on a number of occasions. We talk here about what it takes in this House to ensure that we agree a deal, but that deal has to be agreed with the European Union, and that means that all members of the EU27 have to agree that deal. I was able to have cordial and constructive talks with the Taoiseach on Friday. The right hon. Gentleman referenced his own talks. I hope, trust and believe that all sitting around the table want to ensure we deliver a deal that delivers on the commitments for the people of Northern Ireland and that can pass this House and be agreed by the EU.

Boris Johnson (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con)

I congratulate my right hon. Friend on what she is doing to extricate this country from the humiliation of the backstop, in accordance with the overwhelming wishes of the House, but will she confirm that there is no point having a time limit on the backstop unless that is written into the treaty itself and unless the end date falls substantially before the next general election?

The Prime Minister

As my right hon. Friend already knows, I want to see the future relationship in place by the beginning of 2021, which is well in advance of the next general election. The other point he made is absolutely the point I have been making to the European Union. One of the concerns of this House was that any assurances given on the temporary nature of the backstop in early January were not of the same legal form as the international treaty that forms the withdrawal agreement. That is why we are asking for the assurances to have a legally binding status. The obvious way to do that is within the withdrawal agreement.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab)

I say to the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) that the humiliation this country faces is losing jobs and investment. That is the issue we should be focusing on.

The Business Secretary told our Select Committee last week that Friday 15 February is the deadline for getting a deal for businesses that export to the far east, as shipments take six weeks to arrive. Does the Prime Minister agree with the Business Secretary? Will she guarantee that those free trade agreements that we enjoy today will still exist when those goods arrive on 29 March?

The Prime Minister

We are well aware of the timetables that businesses are working to. That is why we have been pressing and working hard to get the deal agreed by the House and the European Union. It is also the case that we are working on those trade agreements. A number of continuity agreements have been signed with trading nations around the world to ensure that we can continue to trade on the current arrangements.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con)

I welcome the categorical assurance that my right hon. Friend has given the House in respect of the House's ability to debate a neutral motion on Wednesday 27 February, but time is very short. Can she explain to the House how we will comply with the provisions of section 20 of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 if there is a deal? How will we implement the withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill and still leave on 29 March? Is it not the case that looked at realistically, there will have to be an application to extend the article 50 process, even if my right hon. Friend is successful in getting some kind of agreement through the House?

The Prime Minister

As my right hon. and learned Friend said, the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 makes clear that the provisions of the 2010 Act apply to the withdrawal agreement and require it to be laid before Parliament for 21 sitting days. In most circumstances, that period may be important for the House to have an opportunity to study a piece of legislation, but in this instance, MPs will already have debated and approved the agreement as part of the meaningful vote. While we will follow normal procedure if we can, where there is insufficient time remaining following a successful meaningful vote, we will make provision in the withdrawal agreement Bill, with Parliament's consent, to ensure that we are able to ratify on time to guarantee our exit in an orderly way.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC)

Let us remember what this looks to anxious people outside this place. It looks like what it is: a Prime Minister buying time in a disingenuous, transparent attempt to run down the clock and force MPs from all four nations of the UK to back her, with a no-deal done deal looming large. Has she at any point in her accelerated timeline considered how and when she will gain legislative consent from the devolved Parliaments on the withdrawal agreement Bill, which will no doubt encroach on their competencies?

The Prime Minister

The hon. Lady talks about buying time. I am taking the very clear message given by this House of Commons to the European Union to negotiate changes to the deal, such that this House of Commons will have confidence and be able to agree the deal.

Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con)

I welcome the Prime Minister's statement. Does she agree that requiring legally binding changes to the backstop is not only reasonable but essential if we are to pass the deal through this House? While Brexit was the UK's choice, if Brussels remains stubbornly intransigent, a departure on World Trade Organisation terms would be the EU's choice.

The Prime Minister

The point that my right hon. Friend makes about the legally binding nature of the changes is important. This House has been clear about those issues, and, as I mentioned in an earlier response, I have raised with the European Union this question of the different legal force of the commitments that have been made so far and the concern that the withdrawal agreement in the international treaty would currently take precedence over the legal assurances that were given in the separate letter about the temporary nature of the backstop. It is the equivalence of that legally binding nature, to make sure that the withdrawal agreement cannot then trump anything extra, that is important.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op)

The whole House will have heard the Prime Minister's response to the important question from the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) about the withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill. It will also have heard the Prime Minister's response that she does not intend to honour the 21-day period needed to lay it. We have not seen the draft of the Bill, yet it deals with very, very thorny issues about the divorce bill when we leave, EU citizens' rights, the supremacy of European law during the transition period and the consent to remain under the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice during that period. How on earth does the Prime Minister expect Members from all parts of this House to consent to that legislation without seeing a draft of it at this moment in time? Will she not acknowledge that there is no chance that she will pass that legislation in 45 days' time? On that basis, will she commit to extending article 50 so that we do not crash out with no deal, threatening jobs right up and down this country?

The Prime Minister

I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She has raised an important point about the timetable, which was mentioned by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve). As I said, the 21 days in the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 are normally there because there has not been an opportunity for the House to see the nature of the agreement that it is considering. In this case, of course, the House would already have had an opportunity to approve the agreement. We are looking for changes in the agreement, but the vast majority of the agreement will not be changed in the discussions that we are having with the European Union, and the House has already been able to look at that as part of the meaningful vote. I am sure that, when a meaningful vote has been agreed on in this House, every Member will want to ensure that they are able to operate on a timetable that enables us to leave at the end of the two-year period, which was agreed by this House when we triggered article 50.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con)

The Prime Minister is driving this House towards two options that the British people do not want. We have already voted in this House against having a no-deal departure, and we have also already massively voted against her own prime ministerial deal with Brussels. She has simply turned this exercise now into one of cobbling together enough support to win a vote in this House when,

actually, we deserve so much more than that. It is not just about getting the ERG on board, or getting enough Labour MPs to switch sides, but about getting the British people on board for the future that lies ahead. That takes more than just votes here, more than just the results of grubby backroom deals. Is it not time to recognise that the only responsible action ahead of us is to go back to the people and get their seal of approval?

The Prime Minister

I have responded to questions of that ilk from my right hon. Friend on a number of occasions, and I have not changed my opinion. It is important that this House recognises that, having given the choice to the British people as to whether to leave or to stay in the European Union and having received the choice of the British people, we should respect that choice and deliver on it, and that is what we are doing.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP)

I note that, during her statement, the Prime Minister said that she had secured an agreement with the EU for further talks. I am sure that she used the word “talks” advisedly, because when the Brexit Committee was in Brussels last week, we were told very clearly that the negotiations were over and that they ended in November when the Prime Minister shook hands on the deal to which she had agreed. Is not the reality quite simply this: that deal will not be changed by the EU? She cannot get that deal through this House, so what she needs to do is put the deal to the people of the four nations of the United Kingdom.

The Prime Minister

I have just answered exactly that question in relation to a vote, and my view has not changed in the 30 seconds or so since I answered my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening).

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con)

The Malthouse compromise, if adopted, would deliver the requirement of the amendment put down by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady) and passed, which was to replace the backstop. The Prime Minister’s comments just now to my right hon. Friends the Members for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) and for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) were really encouraging. Will she commit to instructing civil servants both in Brussels and in Westminster to work these proposals up into legal text?

The Prime Minister

I believe that my right hon. Friend, along with some of my other right hon. Friends, previously indicated to me that he understood that work done by others outside this House had indeed contributed to a potential legal text. I know that meetings are continuing with officials to look at the issues that have been raised around the alternative arrangements. I have indicated what has happened in relation to that in Brussels, and we will continue to work on those alternative arrangements.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op)

Essentially, the Prime Minister is asking us to please give her more time to convert base metals into gold, but is it not a complete fantasy to expect the Irish Government to put a time limit on the Good Friday agreement? We should not expect them to do that. Unless colleagues across the House take some responsibility on Thursday and snap out of this delusion right now, we will be at the mercy of this Prime Minister’s run-the-clock-down strategy.

The Prime Minister

The hon. Gentleman talks about the issue of the time limit—he described it as a time limit on the Good Friday agreement. No, it would not be a time limit on the Good Friday agreement. This Government remain absolutely committed to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement and to the commitments and obligations that we have within that agreement. We all remain committed to ensuring that there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. I have always said, as has the Taoiseach, that the best way of delivering that is in the future relationship, and that is what we are working to do.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con)

May I reassure the Prime Minister that I am holding my nerve like anything? Will she therefore confirm that it remains at the heart of the Government's policy, in the national interest, to secure a deal, which, at the end of the day, will achieve the closest possible political, economic and security relationship with our friends and allies in the European Union?

The Prime Minister

I thank my right hon. Friend for holding his nerve. May I reassure him that, obviously, what we are doing in negotiating this deal is ensuring that we deliver on the referendum? We will be leaving the European Union, but its countries are our closest neighbours and it remains in the interests of this country, and the European Union, for there to be a close relationship between the UK and the EU in future. We have set out proposals for that future close relationship and, obviously, the second stage of negotiations will be putting that relationship into legal text.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab)

The Prime Minister was quite right to rule out again staying in a customs union, which was not on the manifesto of either of the two main parties. [Interruption.] The customs union. Does she think that we might perhaps change the wording in talking about no deal? If we cannot get an agreement, then surely we can go over to the WTO and use article 24. It is not crashing out. People voted to leave; they did not vote for a deal as such. They voted to leave, and we need to leave on 29 March.

The Prime Minister

Obviously, the hon. Lady and a number of Members in this House have raised the issue of World Trade Organisation arrangements. Of course, there are many parts of the world that we currently trade with—not just with the European Union—on what are EU terms of trade rather than WTO terms. I continue to believe that the best route for this country is to leave with a deal, which is why we are working so hard to get the changes that this Parliament requested.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con)

I welcome the tone that the Prime Minister struck last week in her meeting with businesses in Northern Ireland, where she indicated that she would be seeking changes to the backstop, rather than its wholesale replacement. Is it worth underlining again today the reason why the backstop is there and the important purpose that it serves—namely, locking in something good amidst all the other uncertainty that is going on?

The Prime Minister

My right hon. Friend makes an important point. We all want to see the continuation of the progress that has been made in Northern Ireland, and the economic situation for people in Northern Ireland being enhanced and improved in the coming years. The seamless border is an important part of the progress that has been achieved. I was pleased to be able to go to Belfast and reaffirm our commitment to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, which is unshakeable. There had been some concerns in Northern Ireland, but I was able to allay them. This Government remain absolutely

committed to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement and the progress that has been achieved in Northern Ireland following that agreement.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab)

The Prime Minister rightly said that the political declaration is not legally binding, but can she guarantee that she will still be in her job when our future relationship with the EU is finally agreed? If not, why would any of us take any of her assurances, given that she will not be the Prime Minister who does the final deal?

The Prime Minister

I am committed to ensuring that we are able to deliver on the political declaration and negotiate a future relationship that delivers for the people of this country.

Liz Kendall

indicated dissent.

The Prime Minister

The hon. Lady may shake her head. There are elements of the political declaration that are still for debate, and I recognise that there will be rigorous debate on some of those elements. In short, we want to ensure that when we come to the end of the implementation period, we have that close economic and security relationship with the European Union.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con)

I hope that there is not a special place somewhere in particular for those of us who take a rather literal interpretation of the word “replace”.

The Prime Minister

My right hon. Friend has always held a special place in my estimation and, indeed, in that of Members across the House, and I would not suggest that he would be going to any other special place.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP)

Many of my constituents who live with serious health conditions are very concerned about the disruption to the supply of medicines upon which they rely. Should doctors be writing prescriptions to permit patients to stockpile medical supplies, or can the Prime Minister guarantee today—a mere 45 days from Brexit—that there will be no disruption to medical supplies post Brexit?

The Prime Minister

We are working with suppliers that provide medicines to the UK to ensure that there will be a continuity of supply and that patients will continue to receive the medicines they need in all scenarios, including in the case of no deal, so that patients will not need to, and should not seek to, secure and store additional medicines at home. We have already agreed that medicines and medical products, including medicines that can be bought in shops, will be prioritised to ensure that the flow of all these products will continue unrestricted after 29 March 2019. My right hon. Friend the Health Secretary wrote to health and care providers in December about the preparations for no deal, and we have been discussing with the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland civil service the arrangements that will pertain in those locations.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con)

The Prime Minister tells us that she has a mandate to go back and renegotiate the backstop by virtue of the amendment that was passed on 29 January. But by a bigger margin and on a cross-party basis,

this place gave her another mandate, which was to take no deal off the table. We have voted to reject her deal and we have voted to reject no deal, but not only is the Prime Minister kicking the can down the road yet again, she also again refuses to take no deal off the table. This is in the face of the analysis and advice of the civil servants who have informed the Cabinet, which has debated this issue, of the profoundly bad consequences—in the words of the Business Secretary, the “ruinous” situation—that we would face in the event of no deal. When will the Prime Minister publish that advice and analysis so that my constituents can understand why no deal is no option for this country?

The Prime Minister

My right hon. Friend is obviously right about the votes that took place in this House. However, the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady), which was voted for on a cross-party basis, also referenced the fact that this House wanted to leave the European Union with a deal, and that is what we are working for. I repeat to my right hon. Friend that we cannot just say that we do not want to have no deal; we can only ensure that there is not a no-deal situation by agreeing a deal.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab)

A common external tariff would mean reduced friction in the trade of goods, which would be hugely beneficial for our manufacturing sector. A new customs union would achieve this and would not, as I understand it, prevent us from striking our own trade deals in services. Why, then, is the Prime Minister ruling out this alternative arrangement for the backstop, and why is she so confident that the benefits of setting new tariffs outweigh the negative impacts of increased friction and costs throughout supply chains?

The Prime Minister

The description of the situation given by the hon. Lady is not one that I recognise. If she cares to look at the political declaration—

Laura Smith

I have.

The Prime Minister

The hon. Lady says that she has looked at the political declaration, and we make it clear in that declaration that the future relationship will have no tariffs, quotas or restrictions of that sort. She asked why not a customs union. The customs union requires us not to be able to strike our own trade deals. The benefit of the deal that has been agreed and that the Government first put forward is that we would achieve the benefits of no tariffs, no quotas and no restrictions at the same time as being able to negotiate our own trade deals.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con)

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister referred several times to the need for legal certainty. The response today from the Attorney General to a question that I asked on this very matter suggested that he was always willing to assist the House in being able to find that legal certainty. May I ask that any changes negotiated are brought back to the House, and that the Attorney General gives us the benefit of that advice? The legal certainty is what will make many colleagues feel that they can or cannot support something?

The Prime Minister

I recognise hon. Members' concerns regarding the legally binding nature of any changes that are achieved. Of course, the Attorney General will make information available to the House to enable the House to take its decision.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green)

While the Prime Minister is happy to kick the can down the road for yet another two weeks, over 3 million EU nationals are living in appalling uncertainty. As it stands, the Home Office's EU settlement scheme could leave hundreds of thousands of EU nationals undocumented and at risk from the hostile environment, so will the Prime Minister accept that only a declaratory system, under which those resident in the UK before 29 March are automatically granted leave to remain, would protect all citizens' rights, as she claims she wants to do?

The Prime Minister

We have put forward a sensible and reasonable scheme. We have said that we will guarantee rights for EU citizens here in the UK, even in the event of no deal, so this would not only pertain in the event of a deal. As the hon. Lady will know, no fee will be required on the full roll-out of the settlement scheme, and we will reimburse any fees that have been paid in the pilots. However, we retain the right to ensure that it is possible for this country to determine that individuals who perhaps have a particular criminal record are not in this country, and that is a right that we will look at across the board. The sort of situation that the hon. Lady suggests is therefore not right. We have a good scheme that is easy to use and for which there will be no charge.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con)

I am more optimistic than other members of the Brexit Select Committee; I believe that the EU can and will agree to make legally binding changes that will enable the Attorney General to give revised advice on our not being tied indefinitely into a customs union against our will. But if my right hon. Friend comes back to the House with those changes, at that stage it is surely the responsibility of us all as MPs to support the Bill, get the business done and accept responsibility for that. Does my right hon. Friend agree that any attempt by MPs to pre-position ourselves as blaming the EU for no deal would be a severe dereliction of duty?

The Prime Minister

I certainly agree with my hon. Friend that at the point at which a meaningful vote is brought back to this House, it will be the responsibility of every Member of this House to determine their vote according to the nature of that deal and, of course, according to the views that they feel about no deal. It is the case that the only way to avoid no deal other than—I am sorry, Mr Speaker; I may inadvertently have misled the House myself earlier when I said that the only way to avoid no deal was to agree a deal. Of course, it is possible to avoid no deal by staying in the European Union, but we are not going to do that. [Interruption.] We are not going to do that because that would be going back on the vote of the people of this country. We will be leaving the European Union, and when the deal comes back it will be the responsibility, as my hon. Friend says, of every Member of this House to determine whether or not we move forward with that deal.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab)

With the Prime Minister recklessly running down the clock to a crash-out Brexit, can I say to the responsible members of her Government that if they fail to act soon to prevent such a calamity, history will judge them very, very harshly? But can I also say to my own Front Benchers that now the Government have rejected our offer, if they fail to honour the unanimously agreed policy at our conference in favour of a public vote, they too will be judged very harshly by history?

The Prime Minister

The second part of that question was not addressed to me, so I will not be responding to it. The right hon. Gentleman stands up and says that we are recklessly running down the clock in order to crash out with no deal. That is not the case. If that was the case, I would not be spending time talking to EU leaders, going to Brussels, going to Dublin, and trying to work out a way that we can find to deliver on a deal that respects the concerns raised by this House and that will get through this Parliament.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con)

The organisation Leave Means Leave is telling my constituents that we can walk away from the EU with no agreement but also be a global champion for free trade. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is totally illogical, and that if we want to be a global champion for free trade, our first act should be to agree an agreement with our largest trading partner?

The Prime Minister

My hon. Friend has made an important point, which is that if it is the case that we believe that we want to make trade agreements with countries around the world on terms other than WTO terms, then it also makes sense to make a trading agreement—and we have a very good one proposed by the Government—with the European Union, and that is what we will work to achieve.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op)

The Prime Minister might remember that I congratulated her on trying to speak to a wider group of people and to speak to the Opposition and do all those things that she started doing. From where I am standing, I do not think she has completed that job. I thought there were some good signs this week that there was a discourse and an exchange of views, and we could have seen that in this House there is actually probably a majority for a sensible course forward. On the other hand, can I remind her that outside here, since the referendum, there has been a fantastic change in the national mood? As I go around and speak to people—reasonable people, not the extremists—I find an urgent desire to get this sorted with a second referendum and a people's vote.

The Prime Minister

Certainly, when I go on the doorsteps, I do get from people an urgent desire to get this sorted—not to get a second referendum and a people's vote but actually to deliver on the first vote and, to do so, to leave the European Union on 29 March.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con)

The Prime Minister is absolutely right to hold her nerve. The EU could write the textbook on 11th-hour deals. Most colleagues in this place prefer a good deal to no deal, but can she reassure the House that should we leave on 29 March on no-deal WTO terms, we are sufficiently prepared?

The Prime Minister

We are indeed. We have ramped up our preparations. We are continuing our preparations for no deal. We are engaging not just with Government Departments but with the devolved Administrations and with the Northern Ireland civil service. We are engaging with local authorities up and down the country, and obviously working with businesses and those who would need to make alterations to their operations in the event of no deal. We continue to ramp up those preparations.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab)

We hear a lot about the reasons, or the assumed reasons, why people voted to leave the EU, but one thing I am sure about: the people of this country are demanding effective leadership on this issue and they feel absolutely that they are not getting it from anywhere—anywhere—on the political

landscape. If the Prime Minister's attempts to keep her party together by getting the ERG on board fail, will she accept, at that point, the need to build a consensus properly across the House, and that the easiest way, potentially, of reaching that consensus will be to get her deal over the line, as it stands now, by accepting the case for putting it to the people for ratification?

The Prime Minister

I think that the hon. Lady and I do have a different view in relation to a second referendum, as I have expressed earlier. I think it is important that we deliver on the referendum that took place in 2016, but it is also important that as we do that, we do it in a way that obviously needs to command support from this House. I want to see support from across this House. I think that a strong show of support for a deal across the whole House will be important as we move forward into dealing with the legislation, and for other reasons too. I naturally want my colleagues and our confidence and supply partners to support the deal, but, as I say, I look to having a deal that I can bring back that will command strong support across the House.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con)

My right hon. Friend has repeatedly said that no deal is better than a bad deal. The last deal she put to the House failed, and I welcome her attempts to go back to the EU to strike a better one. But does she agree that to get that better deal, we have to keep no deal on the table as a negotiating tool? Take it off, and no deal—no fair deal—will be struck.

The Prime Minister

I agree with my hon. Friend that we do need to ensure in the negotiations that people recognise the options that are available. As I have said to a number of Members, we are not going to stay in the European Union, so the only other way of not having no deal is to agree a deal. We cannot simply say that we do not want no deal and then not deliver a deal that ensures that we do not have no deal.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP)

This week, the European Commission published a document spelling out the implications of the withdrawal agreement. It made it quite clear that Northern Ireland would have to

“maintain...regulatory alignment with the EU”,

that the EU's customs code would “continue to apply” to Northern Ireland, and that that would mean “systematic” checks on all

“goods travelling from the rest of the UK to Northern Ireland”

at all ports and airports. That would rip apart the United Kingdom. To use the Prime Minister's own words, will she ensure that that must not happen and will not happen?

The Prime Minister

I am as clear as the hon. Gentleman is that we want to ensure that we will keep the United Kingdom together. It was precisely in order to avoid that sort of customs border between GB and Northern Ireland that led to us negotiating the UK customs-wide territory in the withdrawal agreement—in the backstop as it currently appears in the withdrawal agreement. On the issue in relation to regulatory changes, of course we have indicated commitments that the UK Government would be able to make in relation to that situation as we would be respecting what we committed to in the December joint report. I am absolutely clear that everything this Government will be doing we will be doing to ensure that we keep the United Kingdom together. That means keeping Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom—England, Scotland and Wales, as well.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con)

I welcome the Prime Minister's statement, particularly her very clear exposition of why she does not want to remain in the customs union: because it would materially fetter our ability to do international trade deals in our own right. She is absolutely correct in that. Can I ask her to confirm that that position is wholly consistent with the 2017 Conservative manifesto, and will therefore enjoy strong support from all parts of these Benches, whether we have been sent to hell or not?

The Prime Minister

I believe it is consistent with our manifesto. It is also consistent with the original set of principles that I set out in the Lancaster House speech, which many Members refer to.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op)

The Prime Minister has talked about wanting to achieve an orderly Brexit, but the Public Accounts Committee has carried out a lot of work which shows that even with a deal, Brexit will be far from orderly. In the light of that and the points raised by the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) about the constitutional challenge of getting the deal through, will she commit today to not rule out extension of article 50, to ensure that whatever happens, this country is prepared?

The Prime Minister

We will ensure that this country is prepared. The hon. Lady refers to an orderly Brexit. The deal that we negotiated—setting aside the issue of the backstop and the changes to that required by the House—provides for an implementation period, which provides an orderly progression to the future relationship. That is what we are working for, and that is what I hope the House will find its way to agreeing.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con)

Can the Prime Minister be absolutely clear that when we leave the European Union, our environmental standards in this country will rise, not fall?

The Prime Minister

We are committed to ensuring that our environmental standards do not fall. I believe that it is in the interests of this country—indeed, it is the desire of this House and this country—to enhance our environmental standards in the future. The Government have shown their commitment through the 25-year environmental strategy and the environment Bill that my right hon. Friend the Environment Secretary will bring forward. In a number of ways, we are showing our commitment to enhanced environmental standards.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP)

A close member of my family suffers from ulcerative colitis and is a serving police officer. They have been told that they may not be able to access the medicine they need to keep them well on a day-to-day basis. What does the Prime Minister say to my family member and to the many thousands of people across the UK who have chronic illnesses, some of which are exacerbated by anxiety and uncertainty, as she recklessly goes towards no deal by threatening Members? She needs to think again. What impact assessment has she done for people like my family member who are suffering from chronic illnesses?

The Prime Minister

That point was raised earlier by the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), to whom I responded by making clear the work we have been doing with suppliers of medicines to

ensure that there will be continuity of supply and that patients will continue to receive the medicines they need in all scenarios, including a no-deal scenario. When we are able to bring a deal back that deals with the issues raised by this House, the hon. Lady and every Member will have the responsibility of determining whether they want to leave the European Union with or without a deal.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con)

One opportunity to boost our coastal communities post Brexit is the establishment of free ports, which port operators will not consider while we are a member of the customs union. I welcome my right hon. Friend's reaffirmation that we will be leaving the customs union, but can she give an assurance that she will not concede further on that in any customs arrangements that she negotiates, so that we can establish free ports?

The Prime Minister

I know that my hon. Friend has had a great interest in free ports for some time and has been promoting the concept, as has the Mayor of Tees Valley, Ben Houchen. This is an interesting area. There are issues that need to be addressed in relation to free ports, but it is an interesting area that we would want to look at.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab)

In the Prime Minister's statement on 21 January, she told the House that she would

"look for further ways to engage... regional representatives in England."—[Official Report, 21 January 2019; Vol. 653, c. 27.]

In response to my written parliamentary question last week, she said that that would not happen until "the next phase"—in other words, after we have left the EU. How does she expect to build support across the House when she shows this level of contempt for the regions of this country that will be worst affected?

The Prime Minister

That is not the case. I gently remind the hon. Lady that Members of this House represent all parts of the United Kingdom. We are talking with trade unions and businesses about the impact of decisions that are being made on parts of the United Kingdom. As I indicated in my statement, I committed when I became Prime Minister to a country that works for everyone, and that is what we continue to work for.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con)

Is there not a precedent in the EU for member states that have been unable to ratify a treaty because of a democratic decision taken in their own country to go back to the EU and secure important changes? One country did so, having failed to agree the Lisbon treaty through a referendum; it secured legally binding changes by way of a protocol, to which the EU agreed—that country was Ireland.

The Prime Minister

My right hon. Friend is right that there is precedent for a country saying that it is not able to accept the terms of a particular agreement and going back to the European Union to negotiate different terms.

Mr Speaker

Ah yes, the president of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly—President Moon.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab)

Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Prime Minister has made great statements about honouring the referendum, but the thing I am asked most often by colleagues across Europe and people in my constituency is which selective process the Prime Minister used in honouring which votes. We had an election in 2015, and she did not like the result, so she went back to the people in 2017. We had a vote on her deal, and it was rejected, but now we have to look at it again with small alterations. We voted against no deal, and yet she is not implementing that. How can voters in my constituency and people across Europe who watch what happens in this House have any trust that whatever deal is put on the table will be binding and will not be altered should the UK leave the European Union?

The Prime Minister

At the 2017 general election, 80% of the people who voted voted for parties that were committed to honouring the result of the referendum and taking the United Kingdom out of the European Union. That is exactly what the Government are working to do. The hon. Lady refers to no deal. We cannot simply take no deal off the table. As I said, if we are not going to stay in the European Union, the only way to ensure that there is not a no deal is to have a deal.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con)

Surely the backstop has become an unnecessary nightmare for all of us because we do not know what the future trading relationship will be between the UK and the EU27. If Brussels digs in its heels on not giving the small concession that the Prime Minister is asking for, will she seek to go into an implementation period post 29 March for 20 months, in which time we can negotiate the future trading relationship?

The Prime Minister

We will indeed have an opportunity during the implementation period to negotiate the details of that future trading relationship. I expect that to be done by December 2020, such that we are then able to put that future relationship into place.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD)

I was glad that the Prime Minister mentioned her support for the Liberal Democrat policy of shared parental leave, but does she remember her Conservative colleagues who fought tooth and nail against it? Does she remember the Beecroft report—an extensive Conservative assault on workers' rights that was stopped by the Lib Dems? Outside the EU, there is nothing to stop a future Conservative Prime Minister tearing up her legal commitments. There is no Brexit that can guarantee workers' rights, and that is why we need a people's vote.

The Prime Minister

We are giving those commitments in relation to workers' rights. I was the person who ensured that the Conservative party's policy was for flexible working for all and shared parental leave.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con)

I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement today, and I pay tribute to her determination to get a good withdrawal deal and her commitment to ensure that we leave the EU on 29 March. Does she appreciate the strength of feeling in my constituency against the backstop proposal, and will she confirm that she has listened to those concerns and will continue to pursue a real and constructive change in these arrangements?

The Prime Minister

I can give my right hon. Friend that assurance. I have heard the message clearly that Parliament gave in relation to the backstop, and we are working for those legally binding changes that this Parliament wishes to see.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab)

The withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill is legislation of the highest political, legal and constitutional significance. It is absolutely vital that this House has sufficient time to debate and scrutinise it. It would be a constitutional outrage if that were not the case. Does the Prime Minister not then agree that it is crystal clear that we cannot do justice to this vital piece of legislation without an extension of article 50?

The Prime Minister

I assure the hon. Gentleman that, of course, the House will have looked at the nature of the withdrawal agreement through the meaningful vote that it conducts, and giving support for that withdrawal agreement will then enable us to get on with the withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the House will have sufficient time, I believe, to scrutinise that Bill.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con)

Does the Prime Minister agree that talking about helping left-behind areas should not be seen as a tactical matter to get through the withdrawal agreement, but should be at the very heart of what this Government are about? That is promoting a renaissance of the regions as part of building Brexit Britain, and that means every region, including coastal towns, such as Dover and Deal, which I represent.

The Prime Minister

My hon. Friend has made an important point. When I stood on the steps of Downing Street on the first day I was Prime Minister, I was very clear that I wanted to ensure that we worked for those communities that did feel that they were left behind and did feel that they had not achieved the benefits that they had seen some other parts of the country have. That does mean certain parts of the country, and it also means certain types of town, like coastal towns such as Dover and Deal, which my hon. Friend represents and champions so well.

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

In the Prime Minister's statement today and the lack of concrete progress, it feels as though the Prime Minister is purposefully making Parliament hit its head against a brick wall in the hope that when we stop, we might feel better. We are fewer than 45 days away from exit day, yet the Prime Minister is picking and choosing which of the directions from this House that she listens to. This House overwhelmingly said that it wanted to reject no deal. Please, Prime Minister, stop being so stubborn and focusing on buying fridges and fantasy ferries, and at least admit that extending article 50 would help this House take back control?

The Prime Minister

What this House voted for was an amendment that confirmed avoiding a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, confirmed that this House wished to leave with a deal and confirmed the issue that needed to be addressed for this House to agree a deal, and that was the issue of the backstop.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con)

I visited Brussels last week as a member of the Exiting the European Union Committee, and we met Martin Selmayr. Whether or not I believe him is another matter, but he explained to us that he could

see no reason why the Commission would ever want to use the backstop. From the Government supporting the Brady amendment two weeks ago, I have to assume that the Government do not want the backstop. Parliament does not want the backstop, and the Northern Ireland public and the public across the rest of the UK do not want the backstop. May I ask my right hon. Friend: why is it still there?

The Prime Minister

Nobody wants to use the backstop. The reason the backstop is there is that it is the guarantee that there will be no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland in the circumstances in which the future relationship has not come into place at the end of the implementation period. There is an alternative available within the withdrawal agreement, which is a further extension of the implementation period. There are pros and cons in both of those positions. Of course we want to see change to the backstop, but there are issues around the fact that in the implementation period there would almost certainly be a request for money, which does not occur in relation to the backstop. It is there as a guarantee. It is like an insurance policy: you take it out, but you never want to have to use it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP)

A recent national opinion poll in Northern Ireland showed that 60% of those polled were clearly against the backstop—a majority of opinion. Is the EU policy on the backstop like that great Eagles song, “Hotel California”: you can check out anytime you like, but you cannot leave? Will the Prime Minister give an assurance to Unionists in Northern Ireland that there can be no progress unless the backstop is removed or is time-limited?

The Prime Minister

The hon. Gentleman has made the point clearly. In fact, it is this House that has said it requires changes to be made to the backstop—legally binding changes—and that is what we are working for.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con)

I have constituents working at GE Aviation, BAE Systems, Spirax Sarco, Jaguar Land Rover and Honda, and those businesses urgently need certainty. What assurances can the Prime Minister provide that the talks are credible and constructive, not cosmetic, and that they can reasonably be expected to yield progress?

The Prime Minister

The talks I had last week I think indicated, from the point of those in the European Commission, that they do indeed want to ensure we can leave with a deal. They have extended those talks; previously, indeed, there had been some unwillingness to extend the talks. But now that Parliament has shown what it specifically wants to see changing in the withdrawal agreement, we are able to have those talks and to explore the various ways in which we can ensure we deliver a deal that this Parliament can support.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP)

The Prime Minister assured the House on 14 January that the right to be British, Irish or both in Northern Ireland was clear and referenced in the withdrawal agreement, yet in Belfast on 5 February stated that

“I know that in some cases recently, people have encountered difficulties in securing their”—

Irish—

“rights as Irish citizens”.

Does the Prime Minister therefore recognise and agree that Emma DeSouza and many others in Northern Ireland are Irish citizens and therefore EU citizens, all the while the Home Office claims they are British?

The Prime Minister

The hon. Gentleman has raised an issue on which, first, it is absolutely clear that the position of people in Northern Ireland to be Irish, British or indeed both is made very clear in the withdrawal agreement—it is maintained in that withdrawal agreement. There has been an issue raised in relation to a small number of cases about the interaction of that with the immigration rules that we apply here in the United Kingdom, and that is what the Home Secretary is working on.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con)

I welcome the Prime Minister’s statement. Does she agree with me that extending article 50 just to have more months of procrastination and to allow some people to carry on dishing out the soundbites, rather than voting for solutions, will be of no use to us, no use to the EU and no use to our economy either?

The Prime Minister

My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Extending article 50 does not solve the issue; it just extends the length of time of consideration. The point would still have to come when Members of this House would have to make a decision and exercise—respect—their responsibilities. He references the economy. Actually, businesses have said to me that they do not want to see article 50 extended, because they feel that would extend the period of discussion and uncertainty, and they want a deal delivered and a deal agreed.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab)

It is understandable that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition is wary, but he knows that Labour promised in the general election to respect the outcome and to work for a deal, so I hope he will take every opportunity that is offered to him to talk, with the shadow Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Secretary, to the Government and to officials in order to hold the Government to account and the Prime Minister to account on the promises she has made in her statement today, particularly on workers’ rights.

Does the Prime Minister share my concerns about the downturn in economic growth? Since the referendum, 2,000 new jobs have been created at Doncaster iPort in my constituency. It seems to me that it is indecision, not Brexit per se, that is now holding back business. It is absolutely essential that we face compromise in a straightforward way and seek a deal. There are some in this House who say, “Take no deal off the table”, but for them no deal is ever going to be a winner. I ask the Prime Minister to reiterate that, across Parliament, we have to do what business and our communities want, and reach a compromise and get a deal done sooner rather than later.

The Prime Minister

The right hon. Lady makes a very important point, which is that it is in the interests of business and in the interests of communities to get a deal agreed so that we can move forward. I believe there are businesses that are holding back investment in this country, waiting for us to get the deal over the line, and that that investment will be made when we get that deal. It is for every Member of this House to be prepared to accept, as the right hon. Lady has said, that we are all making compromises. The agreement with the European Union involves some compromise—that is because

it is two sides coming together to agree a deal—but it is in the best interests of this country to have that deal and to get it sorted.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con)

I entirely support what the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) has just said.

This morning, I met the representative of a large manufacturer in my constituency who is incredibly concerned about what would happen in the case of no deal. Will my right hon. Friend lay out clearly the consequences of no deal for our vital services sector? It has a trade surplus both with the EU and across the world, and it is responsible for the jobs of so many millions of our fellow citizens.

The Prime Minister

There is absolutely no doubt that no deal would, of course, have an impact on our economy; I think that in the longer term we would be able to recover from that impact. Obviously, there have been a number of academic and other studies that have made assessments of the impact of no deal. As my hon. Friend has said, the services sector is obviously very important for us. That is why I believe that the proposals and the deal in the political declaration, which gives us flexibility in developing our services, including financial services, are so important for the future.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab)

Brexit has evoked many emotions—anger and sadness. Last week, the Prime Minister was in Ireland. Do the Government care about breaking Irish hearts?

The Prime Minister

When I was in Ireland and met the Taoiseach, we were discussing not only the issue of the backstop and getting a deal with the European Union that can get through Parliament, but also the future relationship between the UK and Ireland. Obviously, given the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland—a land border with Ireland: a continuing member of the EU27, but also a close neighbour—we want to ensure that for the future we can enhance and build on the very good relations that the UK and Irish Governments have had in recent years. So I hope that the hon. Lady will be with us.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP)

Political leaders across Europe have been unanimous in stating that the Prime Minister's deal, which was overwhelmingly rejected by this House, was the only deal possible because of the Prime Minister's own red lines. We are now in the terrifying situation that in 45 days we could crash out with no deal. The right hon. Lady has heard Members on both sides calling for an extension to article 50 this afternoon. Will she now tell the House how many votes she is happy to lose before she considers extending article 50?

The Prime Minister

I have set out the procedure that the Government are going to follow in relation to this issue and we continue to work to be able to bring back a deal for a meaningful vote.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab)

The Food and Drink Federation has said today that the industry would face its biggest catastrophe since 1939 if we were to leave without a deal. Yet the Government have still not even reached a deal that we can agree on here, much less to take to Europe. Given all that, how do I justify to my constituents why this Parliament shut at 3.27 pm last Wednesday because the Government had literally nothing for MPs to discuss?

The Prime Minister

Many things happen in Parliament, and not just in this Chamber. The hon. Gentleman might wish to point out to his constituents that the Government have taken the decision of not enabling him to have a recess next week because there is business for this Parliament to do and we will be doing that business.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD)

If the Prime Minister is serious about meeting the 29 March deadline, will she allow the House to get on and do what it is here to do instead of filling our time with general debates and statutory instruments? If we are coming back next week instead of recess, will we deal with the Agriculture Bill, the Fisheries Bill, the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill, the Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill or the Healthcare (International Arrangements) Bill? Will we ever see the withdrawal agreement Bill?

If we are to leave on 29 March, these matters will all have to be dealt with here and in the other place. Why does the Prime Minister not just accept what is obvious to the rest of the world and start now the process for an orderly extension of the article 50 period?

The Prime Minister

The immigration Bill, I believe, is in Committee today, so work is being done on the immigration Bill. [Interruption.] The right hon. Gentleman says it is in Committee: it is the normal procedure of the House of Commons that, having had a Second Reading, a Bill goes into Committee.

I also say to the right hon. Gentleman that next week there will indeed be many statutory instruments that relate to Brexit and that are important preparations for this House to make. He talks about bringing forward a withdrawal agreement Bill: we cannot have a withdrawal agreement Bill until we have a withdrawal agreement. If he wants the Bill, I assume that he is going to support the withdrawal agreement.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab)

We were told that we would see the final report on anti-dumping duties on aluminium foil by Christmas; entirely predictably, we have not seen anything at all. The issue is very niche, but for a company in my constituency it is extremely important. It is one example of where businesses have been left in a state of hopeless uncertainty because of the Government's failure to prepare for Brexit. Is it not time that, rather than letting businesses continue in this state, the Prime Minister announced that she will extend article 50?

The Prime Minister

As I have just indicated, there are businesses saying to me that article 50 extension does not solve the problem for them. What they want to see is a deal agreed by this Parliament and then a deal that has been negotiated with the EU and agreed by this Parliament being put into place.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP)

May I bring the Prime Minister back to workers' rights? She will be aware that the European Parliament and European Commission are currently negotiating for better and stronger workers' rights for workers in the gig economy and for working parents. Those are far better and stronger than those found in the current UK Government's good work plan. If Europe agrees to those new regulations, will the UK Government implement them for working people in the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister

What I have said in the statement and what we have indicated is that if there are future changes to workers' rights in the European Union, we have committed to giving Parliament the opportunity to say whether the United Kingdom would support those rights.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab)

It is patently obvious that the Prime Minister's tawdry strategy is now to string this out until the last second in an attempt to blackmail and bully MPs into supporting this deal. I reassure her that I will take her advice: I will hold my nerve and refuse to bend the knee to this job-destroying Brexit. May I urge my party's Front Benchers to do likewise—refuse to vote for it and instead honour our conference commitment to holding a public vote on this deal?

The Prime Minister

The hon. Gentleman talks about the impact of not having come to a deal at this stage and then in his question wants to go into a situation where we do not have a deal, we do not have agreement across this House and there is an extension of the time and the uncertainty that he has already referred to. I do not think that a people's vote—a second referendum—is the right way forward for the reasons I indicated earlier. I believe that what people want us to do is deliver on the referendum and get on with it.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP)

What progress, if any, has the EU signalled to the Prime Minister may be possible on the backstop to date?

The Prime Minister

That is precisely what we are talking to the European Union about: how we can resolve the issue of the backstop in a way that will command the support of this Parliament. We have agreed that we will enter those talks, and that is exactly what we will be discussing.

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

The European Union and all the people speaking for it in the different institutions have made it absolutely clear that the withdrawal agreement negotiated by this Prime Minister, agreed by this Prime Minister and signed off by this Prime Minister is not going to be amended. But this House has rejected the withdrawal agreement. Is not the only way out of this now—and this gives the Prime Minister what she wants—for this House to adopt the negotiated withdrawal agreement with a sunset clause? Then it can be put to the people in a referendum: whether they accept it or whether they wish to remain in the EU with the better deal that we have now.

The Prime Minister

I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answers I gave earlier in relation to the issue of a second referendum.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD)

Given that the Prime Minister has said repeatedly that she will not go back and give the country the choice on whether this is actually what they want, given that she has said repeatedly that she does not want to extend article 50 and given that she refuses to take no deal off the table, what advice would she give to those tens of thousands of UK students currently studying in the EU? What about those British holidaymakers who have already made their arrangements? They may have chronic health conditions and find that they are not able to get cover.

The Prime Minister

The hon. Lady indicates her concerns about the prospect of leaving with no deal. There is an answer to ensuring that we do not leave with no deal and that is to agree a deal.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab)

The duty of any Government is to keep their citizens safe and surely there can be no compromise on that, so is the Prime Minister really saying that, despite all the warnings from the police and the security services about the effect on our national security of crashing out with a no deal, she is willing to allow us to crash out on 29 March, rather than extend article 50?

The Prime Minister

What I am saying is that the first aim of the Government must be what we are doing, which is negotiating changes to the deal with the European Union that can be brought back to this House and can command the support of this House.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD)

No fewer than eight Government Ministers have described no deal in terms such as “catastrophic”, “a betrayal”, “disastrous” and “the worse possible outcome”. Why is the Prime Minister still playing Russian roulette with the option of no deal? At what stage of this lethal game does she expect those Ministers to resign from her Government? Perhaps that should be on Thursday, when Parliament has the opportunity to find a way of ruling out no deal once and for all. [Interruption.]

The Prime Minister

The right hon. Gentleman says that Parliament would find a way of ruling out no deal once and for all. There are only two ways in which we can ensure that we do not have a no-deal situation. One is to stay in the European Union. The right hon. Gentleman might want to do that. [Interruption.] He says, “Yes, absolutely” from a sedentary position. That is not the result of the referendum. The Government will deliver on the result of the referendum and we will leave the European Union. The only other way of ensuring that we do not have no deal is to agree a deal. That seems to be pretty obvious to me.

Mr Speaker

I think the proper response to the sneeze from the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) at the end of the last question is, “Bless you.”

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab)

We are now 45 days away from the projected departure date, and we still have no clarity and no closure on a deal that the Prime Minister negotiated when there were 135 days to go. May I ask for her opinion on this statement from the innocent days when there were only 110 days to go, on the eve of the last pulled vote in December?

“If Parliament does not agree a Brexit deal soon then we must recognise that the original mandate to leave, taken over two years ago, will begin to date and will, eventually, no longer represent a reflection of current intent.”

Those are not my words, but the words of the right hon. and gallant Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood). If members of her own Government get it, why won’t she? Can she not see why the general public see that her only strategy is to run down the clock?

The Prime Minister

The Government’s position is very clear. We believe it is better for this country to leave with a deal. That is the position that the House of Commons has taken, but the House of Commons has also said

that it does not agree the deal that was negotiated. It wants to see changes to the backstop and that is what we are working for.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con)

The Prime Minister has taken many questions encouraging her to end uncertainty by taking no deal off the table, but many others encouraging her to create more uncertainty by extending article 50 and calling for a second referendum. The Liberal Democrats managed to advocate both in the same question. Does she share my confusion over the uncertainty among those who oppose Brexit over whether uncertainty is acceptable or not?

The Prime Minister

My hon. Friend has very neatly pointed out the contradiction in many of the contributions that have been made in the House today.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab)

The Prime Minister has spoken about how she wants a country that works for everyone and in her speech she talked about the damage that would be done to the public's faith in our democracy. What is her message to the 48.1% who voted remain, who did not get a mention in her statement?

The Prime Minister

The deal that the UK Government have been pursuing is one that respects the result of the referendum but does so in a way that protects jobs, protects our security and protects the Union of the United Kingdom. I believe that that is the deal that is right for everyone across the United Kingdom.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP)

Last week, my constituent Karin Vaughan had to travel to a registration centre in Edinburgh from the village of Letham in Fife. Mrs Vaughan moved to the UK 74 years ago when she was three months old. Her village is very, very angry. She is upset. What is the Prime Minister's message to Mrs Vaughan? I hope it is, "I'm sorry."

The Prime Minister

The hon. Gentleman raises a specific case. I do not know all the details of the case that he has raised. If he is reflecting the fact that we are saying that those who are European Union citizens, in order to ensure they have the verification of their position here, should apply under the EU settlement scheme, then I believe the Government are taking the right approach. We are making that an easy scheme for people. As he knows, I have said that from the national roll-out of that scheme there will be no fee.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab)

The proposals from my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) have the best prospect of securing a majority across the House, far better than the Prime Minister's deal, which was voted against by two thirds of hon. Members. Is it not therefore incumbent on her to facilitate negotiations in co-operation with the Labour Front-Bench team and the European Union to see how much progress can be made on those proposals, and then bring them back to this House as they represent the best way forward?

The Prime Minister

As I indicated in my statement, we are continuing our discussions with the official Opposition, but it is also the case that this House made clear what it is that it wants to see in order to be prepared to

agree a deal. That was made clear in the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady), which was approved by this House.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP)

I am sure that, like you, Mr Speaker, the Prime Minister is ferociously well read and will have read the 14th century masterpiece, “The Divine Comedy”, which is home to Dante’s inferno, the nine circles of hell. The eighth circle was reserved for fraudsters. Is that not where we will find those from the referendum campaign who broke electoral law, and deployed all kinds of political sorcery and false promise to win the referendum? At this rate, I am afraid to say, it is probably where the Prime Minister’s own withdrawal agreement is going.

The Prime Minister

No.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab)

It is absolutely clear that the EU will not reopen negotiations to discuss the draft withdrawal agreement on the backstop, or on any other of the issues. It is profoundly disappointing that the Prime Minister is pretending otherwise. It is also clear, as the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) and others have said, that we are running out of time, that the economy is stalling and that businesses are really floundering. So in the interests of the country, Prime Minister, will you agree to extend article 50?

The Prime Minister

We are in talks with the European Union, so the premise of the hon. Lady’s question is, I believe, not correct. They are talking to us about what changes could be possible in relation to the backstop. That is the first point. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) pointed out, to complain about the impact of uncertainty on the economy and then to ask to increase the period of uncertainty is a contradiction.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

Mention has been made of the different parts of the UK. I have the honour to represent the far north of Scotland—I suspect the House has gathered that by now. When I put it to the Prime Minister a few days ago that European structural funds had brought great historic good to my part of the world—they have greatly benefited my constituents, paying for new airports, roads, economic development, tourism and so on—she referred me to the shared prosperity fund. We are very scant on the detail of the shared prosperity fund. May I respectfully ask her to ask her officials to meet me and other interested Members to discuss what the fund might be and how it might apply to needy areas such as mine?

The Prime Minister

We will be consulting on the nature of the shared prosperity fund and the criteria under which it will operate, so I will ask the relevant Minister to meet the hon. Gentleman in the way he has requested.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab)

Police chiefs told us yesterday that no deal will mean no access to DNA, no access to security alerts on terrorism and no access to the European arrest warrant. The Prime Minister’s own deal will not give security on those issues over the next two years pending discussions with the European Court of Justice, so why is she undertaking this reckless action? Will she undertake a backstop on security?

The Prime Minister

The deal we have negotiated on security does provide. There are, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, two areas where it does not specify the particular instruments that will be used in relation to access, for example, to criminal records, but it does specify that that access will be enabled and the discussions will be on the form that that access takes. The deal we have agreed ensures that we are able to continue the security co-operation with the European Union that has helped to keep us safe.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab)

The Prime Minister just said that she thinks her deal is the best for the UK, so why will she not put her trust in the UK people and put it back to them for ratification?

The Prime Minister

I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I gave to that question earlier.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP)

The Prime Minister mentioned the meetings that she had with political parties in Northern Ireland, but she gave no indication at all of having listened to anything they had to say. Sinn Féin and the Social Democratic and Labour party could not have been clearer that tinkering with the backstop is tantamount to tinkering with the permanence of a peace agreement and cannot be accepted. Meanwhile, in a statement issued on 7 February, the Ulster Unionists said that

“as time is short, an extension to Article 50 must not be ruled out if a workable deal is to be reached.”

Will the Prime Minister tell us whether she is listening to the majority in Northern Ireland, or is she still obsessed with following the orders of the minority, as is shown by the empty Democratic Unionist party Benches?

The Prime Minister

When I was in Northern Ireland, I met the five political parties. I met representatives from civil society and businesses. They were making a variety of points in relation to this issue. One of the points that civil society was making in particular was the importance of the commitment to no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland in helping to ensure that the progress that had been made in Northern Ireland since the Belfast/Good Friday agreement would continue.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab)

In her statement, the Prime Minister used the phrase “hold your nerve” with regards to negotiations with the EU, but is she also not saying to the sensible members of her Cabinet, many of whom are sitting on the Front Bench with her, that they should hold their nerve in refusing to take no deal off the table so that she can run down the clock, come back to this House at the 11th hour and blackmail the House to back her deal?

The Prime Minister

The choice that this House and Members of this House will face—this choice will come at whatever point, but I believe that it should come before 29 March so we can deliver on leaving the EU on 29 March—is very simply whether they do want to leave with a deal, or whether they want to leave with no deal, because unless you stay in the European Union, the only way not to have no deal is to agree a deal.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)

Since her drubbing in this House in January, the Prime Minister has sought to reopen the withdrawal deal but, in the last two weeks, the Austrian Chancellor, the German Chancellor, the

Dutch Prime Minister, the President of the European Council, the French President, the Irish Prime Minister and the President of the European Commission have all been absolutely unequivocal in saying that they will not be reopening the deal. Yet the Prime Minister still acts as if it is all going swimmingly. Can she tell us which one of that group she expects to blink first?

The Prime Minister

Some of the people the hon. Gentleman has referred to have also referred to the need for us to find creative solutions to ensure that we can deal with the issue that has been raised by this Parliament.

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

So far, the Prime Minister's Brexit policy has involved transport arrangements with no ships, a facilitation arrangement in Northern Ireland with no facilitators and a backstop arrangement that does not actually stop anything. On top of that, we have been promised meaningful votes that disappear like mirages as we get near them. When will the Prime Minister get real and recognise that only a customs union with the EU will sort the Northern Ireland border issue, protect our manufacturing and command a majority of the House?

The Prime Minister

It is not the case that the only resolution of the issue of the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland is a customs union with the European Union.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op)

The Government's own economic analysis, which was of the Chequers deal, not the Prime Minister's disastrous deal, demonstrated that our nation and the people of our country are going to be significantly poorer. Why does the Prime Minister think that, without a customs union, people on these Benches—Labour MPs—will vote for people to be poorer by following her deal?

The Prime Minister

First, I did make it clear that the deal that the Government had put forward was analysed in the economic analysis. We recognise that there was not economic analysis of the political declaration, which is part of the vote that took place in the House of Commons, because there are elements of that that are not yet tied down and agreed. However, variations were indicated within the economic analysis. A mid-term variation in relation to friction at the border was indicated. I say to the hon. Lady that it is not the case that the analysis shows that leaving the EU and the deals that are proposed would leave us poorer than we are today. What it does show is differences in the growth in the economy under the various deals, compared with staying in the European Union, but we are leaving the EU, and the analysis showed that the deal that the Government had proposed was the deal that was best for respecting the referendum and protecting jobs and the economy.

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

The Prime Minister is offering a choice between being shot in the head with a no-deal Brexit or shot in the foot with her Brexit. When will she realise that the best way of getting her deal through this House is with the proviso that it will be ratified by a public vote, when the public can judge between her deal and the existing deal—staying in the EU? If they opt for that, we will save the two years of the transition period and can get on with the jobs at hand.

The Prime Minister

I am not quite sure what timescale the hon. Gentleman thinks he would save by having a second referendum, because that in itself would take considerable time to take through the House and put in place. I will respond to him in the way that I have responded to others: I do not believe that it is

right to have a second referendum. I believe that it is right to deliver on the result of the 2016 referendum.

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

The Prime Minister could achieve a majority in the House if she were just to recognise the scale of the defeat that she had on her deal recently and bring forward an amendment to her red lines on a customs union, with a British say in trade deals. That would be the way to break the impasse, but she does not seem to be prepared to do that because it would break her own party in the process, so it is party before country. However, she is also presenting a false choice to Parliament by saying that it is a choice between a deal or crashing out with no deal. We know for a fact that the Prime Minister has the option, if it came down to the wire—to the last 24 hours—to revoke article 50 and stop the clock to save us from a disastrous no deal. If it came to it, would the Prime Minister do that?

The Prime Minister

The hon. Gentleman suggests that I revoke article 50. Revoking article 50 means going back on the result of the 2016 referendum—

Mr Sweeney
indicated dissent.

The Prime Minister

It is no good the hon. Gentleman shaking his head. What the European Court of Justice made clear in its determination was that it was open to an individual member state to request a revocation of article 50, but that that meant staying in the European Union.

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

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
rose—

Mr Speaker

Ah! Of course “B” for “Brown” comes before “G” for “Gray”, but on the other hand, “A” for “Airdrie” comes before “K” for “Kilmarnock”. I call Mr Neil Gray.

Neil Gray

Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Prime Minister asked us to hold our nerve and essentially to trust her, but does she not have a nerve in asking us to support her plan when it has been her plan, her deal and her intransigence for 30 months that have got us into this mess? How can we trust her when she continues to run down the clock by wasting our time this week and next by re-tabling a motion from last month, and when she continues to gamble by putting a no deal in front of us in order to put her party and her position ahead of the people?

The Prime Minister

What the Government are doing is taking the instruction of this Parliament, which was to get changes to the withdrawal agreement and to the backstop, so that this Parliament can agree a deal. That is what we are working on and what we are determined to deliver.

Alan Brown

On the “trust me” and “hold your nerve” theme, let us look at the no-deal preparations in terms of the ferry contract. Using an emergency procedure exemption for direct awards to the ferry companies in breach of European rules, there was an award to a ferry company with no ships and negative assets. Yesterday at the Dispatch Box, the Transport Secretary said, “Don’t worry, it hasn’t cost taxpayers money”—we now learn that up to £800,000 has been spent on external consultants—and he ducked issues about legal challenges while his Department was in court. Will the Prime Minister sack the Transport Secretary, or is that the general level of competence of this Government, which we are supposed to have trust in?

The Prime Minister

The hon. Gentleman talks about money spent. Money was indeed spent on securing all the contracts let. Third-party due diligence was properly carried out and would have been regardless of who the agreements were entered into with.

Mr Speaker

I am grateful to the Prime Minister and all colleagues.

I have been advised that the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), the leader of the Scottish National party, has a point of order that relates to earlier exchanges. If that be so, I am happy to take it now.

Ian Blackford

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I rise more in sorrow than in anger. We live in exceptional times. It is one thing to hear the Prime Minister say she wanted this decided in December, when it was she who took it off the table, but if that were not bad enough, when I pressed her on the economic analysis of her deal, she said the Government had published economic assessments of the proposals. Furthermore, she also said that I had perhaps inadvertently misled the House, which beggars belief, because if anyone has inadvertently misled the House, it is the Prime Minister. The fact is the Treasury published an economic analysis of Brexit in November, before the Prime Minister’s deal, that in no way referred to the Prime Minister’s deal. This goes way beyond spinning.

Perhaps more importantly, the House is to be asked to vote on a proposition without the economic impact assessment. I am asking two things. First, can the Prime Minister correct the record? Secondly, what options are open to us to make sure that before we come to perhaps the most important vote this House will take we have the facts of the economic assessment? It is the case that under any of the Treasury’s Brexit assessments we will be worse off than under the current deal. That is the fact and the reality of the situation. The Prime Minister really has to learn some grace.

Mr Speaker

The Prime Minister has been at the Dispatch Box for two and a quarter hours and has answered all inquiries. She is welcome to return to the Dispatch Box and respond to the right hon. Gentleman, but she is under no obligation to do so.

The Prime Minister

I said that the Government had put forward a deal and that an economic analysis was done on that deal. The political declaration was part of what was brought to the House. The right hon. Gentleman says there was no reference to that in the economic analysis. The economic analysis indicated what might be the impact of the various elements of the spectrum of choice on friction at the border. It reflected the fact that the political declaration had not confirmed the point at which friction would or would not occur. That was in the economic analysis published before the meaningful vote.

Ian Blackford
rose—

Mr Speaker

No, no, no. I gently say to the right hon. Gentleman that I think that for today honour is served. I was happy to hear his point of order, and the Prime Minister has graciously responded.

I do not wish to invest the proceedings with levity, but the right hon. Gentleman asks what can be done to ensure that all the facts are in the possession of the House when key votes take place. I do not suppose he is investing me with powers to ensure that state of affairs. I cannot, not least because one person's fact is another's opinion. That is in the nature of political argument. I would only say—and another example has been provided today by the exchanges on this statement, for which I again thank the Prime Minister and all colleagues—that the House will always have the fullest possible opportunity, institutionally and individually, to state views, to pose questions and to extract answers. That is the best we can do. My role is simply to try to facilitate that. I am glad that we have, I think, finished on a reasonably harmonious note. Let us leave it there for now.

Royal Assent

Mr Speaker

Before we move to the second statement—the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has been in his place patiently awaiting the opportunity to make it—I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that Her Majesty has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Finance Act 2019

Voyeurism (Offences) Act 2019

Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019

Tenant Fees Act 2019

Crime (Overseas Production Orders) Act 2019.