

HOUSE OF COMMONS HANSARD

No Confidence in Her Majesty's Government

16 January 2019

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[Relevant documents: Fourteenth Report of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, *The Role of Parliament in the UK Constitution*; Interim Report, *The Status and Effect of Confidence Motions*; and the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, HC 1813.]

13:08:00

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab)

I beg to move,

That this House has no confidence in Her Majesty's Government.

Last night, the Government were defeated by 230 votes—the largest defeat in the history of our democracy. They are the first Government to be defeated by more than 200 votes. Indeed, the Government themselves could barely muster more than 200 votes. Last week, they lost a vote on the Finance Bill—that is what is called supply. Yesterday, they lost a vote by the biggest margin ever—that is what is regarded as confidence. By any convention of this House—by any precedent—loss of confidence and supply should mean that they do the right thing and resign.

The Prime Minister has consistently claimed that her deal, which has now been decisively rejected, was good for Britain, workers and businesses. If she is so confident of that—if she genuinely believes it—she should have nothing to fear from going to the people and letting them decide.

In this week in 1910, the British electorate went to the polls. They did so because Herbert Asquith's Liberal Government had been unable to get Lloyd George's "People's Budget" through the House of Lords. They were confident in their arguments, and they went to the people and were returned to office. That is still how our democracy works. When we have a Government that cannot govern, it is those conventions that guide us in the absence of a written constitution. If a Government cannot get their legislation through Parliament, they must go to the country for a new mandate, and that must apply when that situation relates to the key issue of the day.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con)

Is not the Leader of the Opposition engaging in a piece of shameless political opportunism, putting party interests ahead of national interests? Is he not simply trying to disguise the fact that he has no policy on this great issue?

Jeremy Corbyn

In 2017, the Prime Minister and her party thought that they could call an election and win it. They thought that they would return with an overall majority, but there was an enormous increase in the Labour vote—the biggest since 1945—during that campaign when people saw what our policies actually were.

When the Prime Minister asked to be given a mandate, she bypassed the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 which, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), the shadow Foreign Secretary, pointed out, was designed to give some stability to the Tory-Lib Dem coalition Government to ensure that the Lib Dems could not hold the Conservatives to ransom by constantly threatening to collapse the coalition. The 2011 Act was never intended to prop up a zombie Government, and there can be no doubt that this is a zombie Government.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP)

If the right hon. Gentleman's motion is successful this evening, there may be a general election in a few short weeks. Would the Labour party manifesto state whether it will be a party of Brexit or a party against Brexit? It is a simple question; what is the answer?

Jeremy Corbyn

We are a democratic party, and our party will decide what policy we fight the election on. In the meantime, however, we are clear that there has to be a customs union, access to European trade and markets, and the protection of rights, and there must be a rejection of a no-deal Brexit.

As I was saying, last week this Government became the first for more than 40 years to lose a vote on a Finance Bill. In a shocking first for this Government—a shocking first—they forced a heavily pregnant Member of this House, my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), to delay a scheduled caesarean to come to vote, all because of their cynical breaking of trusted pairing arrangements. We need to examine our procedures to ensure that such a thing can never happen again.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con)

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Could you please assist the House, because this is an important matter? I say this as a woman. We need to establish once and for all whether the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) was offered a pair. I think all of us and the public need to know.

Mr Speaker

The Clerk reminds me that that is not a point of order. My understanding is that there was a pairing opportunity, but the issue was aired in the chamber on Monday and again yesterday. The Leader of the Opposition is absolutely entitled to highlight his concern about the matter, which I know is widely shared, but it should not now be the subject of further points of order. I hope that that satisfies the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry).

Jeremy Corbyn

Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Nothing demonstrates the sheer incompetence of this Government quite like the Brexit negotiations. Yesterday's historic and humiliating defeat was the result of two years of chaos and failure. It is clear that this Government are not capable of winning support for their core plan on the most vital issue facing this country. The Prime Minister has lost control and the Government have lost the ability to govern. Within two years, they have managed to turn a deal from what was supposed to be—I remember this very well—

“one of the easiest in human history”

into a national embarrassment. In that time, we have seen the Prime Minister's demands quickly turn into one humiliating climbdown after another. Brexit Ministers have come, and Brexit ministers have gone, but the shambles has remained unchanged, culminating in an agreement that was described by one former Cabinet Minister as

“the worst of all worlds.”

Let me be clear that the deal that the Prime Minister wanted this Parliament to support would have left the UK in a helpless position, facing a choice between seeking and paying for an extended transition period or being trapped in the backstop. The Prime Minister may claim the backstop would never come into force—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker

Order. There are courtesies in this place. A Member can seek to intervene, but he or she should not do so out of frustration by shrieking an observation across the Floor.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con)

I was not shrieking.

Mr Speaker

Well, whether we say shriek or yell or bellow or shout, it was very noisy, and it was disorderly. The right hon. Gentleman knows that I hold him in the highest regard and have great affection for him, but he must behave better.

Mr Francois

Isn't the Leader of the Opposition supposed to—

Mr Speaker

Whether an intervention is taken or not—

Mr Francois

All right.

Mr Speaker

No, there is no “all right” about it. The person who has the Floor decides whether to take an intervention. That is life. That is the reality. That is the way it has always been.

Jeremy Corbyn

Who has confidence in this Government's ability to negotiate a future trade deal with the EU by December 2020 after the shambles that we have all witnessed over the past two years? This Frankenstein deal is now officially dead, and the Prime Minister is trying to blame absolutely everybody else.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab)

In modern British history, when faced with a defeat even a fraction of the size of the titanic and calamitous margin that the Prime Minister faced yesterday, Prime Ministers have done the right and honourable thing and have resigned and called a general election. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Prime Minister, in the pursuit of power and the trappings of office, has now forgotten what is right and honourable?

Jeremy Corbyn

I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. As I made clear, all the precedents are that when a Government experiences a defeat like last night's, it is time to resign and allow the people to elect a new Parliament to deal with the issues facing the country.

Let me be clear that the blame for this mess lies firmly at the feet of the Prime Minister and her Government, who have time after time made hollow demands and given what turned out to be false promises. They say that they want this Parliament to be sovereign. Yet when their plans have come up against scrutiny, they have done all they can to obstruct and evade. The Prime Minister's original plan was to push through a deal without the appropriate approval of this Parliament, only to be forced into holding a meaningful vote by the courts and by Members of this House, to whom I pay tribute for ensuring that we actually had the meaningful vote last night.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD)

As I understand it, the Leader of the Opposition will allow his party to decide whether he will deliver Brexit should he become Prime Minister. His party has already decided that if he is not successful in getting a general election, he should support a people's vote. If he does not win the vote tonight, will he then support moves in this House to give us a people's vote?

Jeremy Corbyn

I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman is fully aware of the decision made at my party's conference that all options are on the table for the next phase, including the option to which he has referred.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab)

In this national crisis, will my right hon. Friend confirm whether the Prime Minister has telephoned the Leader of the Opposition to ask for a meeting to discuss the way forward for our country?

Jeremy Corbyn

I have not had such a call as yet. I have my phone on. [Interruption.]

I think we should proceed with this debate. The Prime Minister's original plan was to push through a deal without approval, as I pointed out, and she was forced into seeking approval by the courts. Since losing their majority in the 2017 general election, the Government have had numerous opportunities to engage with others and listen to their views, not just here in Westminster, but across the country. Their whole framing of the EU (Withdrawal) Bill was about giving excessive power to the Secretary of State for Brexit at the expense of Parliament. It was a Bill of which Henry VIII would have been very proud.

Yesterday's decisive defeat is the result of the Prime Minister not listening and ignoring businesses, unions and Members of this House. She has wasted two years recklessly ploughing on with her doomed strategy. Even when it was clear that her botched and damaging deal could not remotely command support here or across the country, she decided to waste even more time by pulling the meaningful vote on 11 December on the empty promise, and it was an absolutely empty promise, of obtaining legal assurances on the backstop—another month wasted before the House could come to its decision last night.

Some on the Government Benches have tried to portray the Prime Minister's approach as stoical. What we have seen over the past few months is not stoical; what we have witnessed is the Prime Minister acting in her narrow party interest, rather than in the public interest. Her party is fundamentally split on this issue, and fewer than 200 of her own MPs were prepared to support her last night. This constrains the Prime Minister so much that she simply cannot command a majority

in this House on the most important issue facing this country without rupturing her party. It is for that reason that the Government can no longer govern.

Yesterday, the Prime Minister shook her head when I said that she had treated Brexit as a matter only for the Conservative party, yet within half an hour of the vote being announced the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) commented:

“She has conducted the argument as if this was a party political matter rather than a question of profound national importance”.

How right he was, and how wrong the Prime Minister was to threaten him before the vote took place.

I know that many people across the country will be frustrated and deeply worried about the insecurity around Brexit, but if this divided Government continue in office, the uncertainty and risks can only grow.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con)

When those cross-party talks start, which of the Scarlet Pimpernels will come? Will it be the Leader of the Opposition who campaigns for remain in London and the south-east, or will it be the Leader of the Opposition who campaigns for Brexit up north? We need to know.

Jeremy Corbyn

There has been no offer or communication on all-party talks. All the Prime Minister said was that she might talk to some Members of the House. That is not reaching out. That is not discussing it. That is not recognising the scale of the defeat they suffered last night.

It is not just over Brexit that the Government are failing dismally, letting down the people of this country. There has been the Windrush scandal, with the shameful denial of rights and the detention, and even the deportation, of our own citizens. The Government's flagship welfare policy, universal credit, is causing real and worsening poverty across this country. And just yesterday, under the cover of the Brexit vote, they sneaked out changes that will make some pensioner households thousands of pounds worse off. Those changes build on the scourge of poverty and the measures inflicted on the people of this country, including the bedroom tax, the two-child limit, the abominable rape clause, the outsourced and deeply flawed work capability assessment, the punitive sanctions regime and the deeply repugnant benefits freeze.

People across this country, whether they voted leave or remain, know full well that the system is not working for them. If they are up against it and they voted remain, or if they are up against it and they voted leave, this Government do not speak for them, do not represent them and cannot represent them. Food bank use has increased almost exponentially. More people are sleeping on our streets, and the numbers have shamefully swelled every year. The Conservative party used to call itself the party of home ownership; it is now called the party of homelessness in this country.

Care is being denied to our elderly, with Age UK estimating that 1.2 million older people are not receiving the care they need. Some £7 billion has been cut from adult social care budgets in the past nine years. Our NHS is in crisis, waiting time targets at accident and emergency—[Interruption.] I am talking about waiting times at accident and emergency departments and for cancer patients that

have not been met since 2015, and that have never been met under the Government of this Prime Minister.

The NHS has endured the longest funding squeeze in its history, leaving it short-staffed to the tune of 100,000 and leaving NHS trusts and providers over £1 billion in deficit. The human consequences are clear. Life expectancy is now going backwards in the poorest parts of our country and is stagnating overall, which is unprecedented —another shameful first for this Government and another reason why this Government should no longer remain in office. That is why this motion of no confidence is so important.

Anna Soubry

The Leader of the Opposition is making some powerful arguments—not very well, but he is making them—but could he help us with this? I saw an opinion poll at the weekend. If there is any merit in his arguments, can he explain why the Conservative party is six points ahead in the polls? Could it be because he is the most hopeless Leader of the Opposition we have ever had?

Jeremy Corbyn

I thank the right hon. Lady for her intervention, and I look forward to testing opinion at the ballot box in a general election, when we will be able to elect a Labour Government in this country.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab)

My right hon. Friend is right to put on record the concerns about uncertainty in the country, and he is absolutely right to talk about poverty. Can he confirm that it is the position of the British Labour party to rule out a no-deal Brexit? Can he understand why the party that claims to be the traditional party of business will not do the same?

Jeremy Corbyn

I can absolutely confirm that. We have voted against a no-deal Brexit, and apparently the Business Secretary thinks that vote is a good idea. The Prime Minister was unable to answer my question on this during Prime Minister's Question Time. A no-deal Brexit would be very dangerous and very damaging for jobs and industries all across this country.

Imran Hussain

Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Jeremy Corbyn

I will give way one more time.

Imran Hussain

I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. He is absolutely right that, under this Government, we see our NHS in crisis and education underfunded. Our communities have been devastated by their austerity agenda. More people are homeless, more people are living in poverty and more people are using food banks. If the Government disagree, why do they not call a general election? We are ready.

Jeremy Corbyn

I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention and for his work representing his constituency. On this side of the House, we are determined to force this Government to accept the reality of the defeat last night and to go to the people so that they can decide whether they want a party in office that promotes inequality, poverty and injustice in Britain, or the Labour alternative, which is bringing people together, however they voted in the referendum.

I know that some Members of this House are sceptical, and members of the public could also be described as sceptical, but I truly believe that a general election would be the best outcome for this country. As the Prime Minister pointed out in her speech yesterday, both the Labour party and the Conservative party stood on manifestos that accepted the result of the referendum. Surely any Government would be strengthened in trying to renegotiate Brexit by being given a fresh mandate from the people to follow their chosen course. I know many people at home will say, “Well, we’ve had two general elections and a referendum in the last four years.” For the people of Scotland, it is two UK-wide elections, one Scottish parliamentary election and two referendums in five years. So although Brenda from Bristol may gasp “Not another one”, spare a thought for Bernie from Bute. However, the scale of the crisis means we need a Government with a fresh mandate. A general election can bring people together, focusing on all the issues that unite us—the need to solve the crises in our NHS, our children’s schools and the care of our elderly.

We all have a responsibility to call out abuse, which has become too common, whether it is the abuse that Members of this House receive or the abuse that is—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker

Order. No, Mr David Morris, do not yell from a sedentary position like that. If you seek to intervene, you seek to do so in the usual way—that is the only way to do it. Just because you are angry, it does not justify your behaving in that way. Stop it.

Jeremy Corbyn

Thank you. Mr Speaker.

Mr Francois

Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Jeremy Corbyn

No. I am sure we can all unite in condemning racist abuse in any form whatsoever within our society. Too many of our constituents have faced that since the toxic debate in the last referendum and, if I may say so, the Government’s hostile environment policies on the Windrush generation.

Many media pundits and Members of this House say there is currently no majority in the House for a general election—let the Members of this House decide. However, it is clear there is no majority for the Government’s Brexit deal and there is no majority either for no deal. I pay tribute to all Members of this House who, like the Labour Front-Bench team, are committed both to opposing the Prime Minister’s bad deal, which we voted down last night, and to ruling out the catastrophe of no deal. But I do believe that following the defeat of the Government’s plan, a general election is the best outcome for the country, as the Labour party conference agreed last September.

A general election would give new impetus to negotiations, with a new Prime Minister, with a new mandate, and not just to break the deadlock on Brexit, but to bring fresh ideas to the many problems facing our constituents, such as very low pay, insecure work and in-work poverty, which is increasing. They face the problems of trying to survive on universal credit and living in deep poverty; and the scandal of inadequate social care, which might not concern the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) but does concern millions of people around this country.

Then we have the crisis facing local authorities, health services and schools, which are starved of resources; and the housing and homelessness crisis, whereby so many of our fellow citizens have no roof over their head night after night.

Mr Francois

On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Jeremy Corbyn

They are looking to Parliament to deliver for them a better and fairer society—

Mr Speaker

Is the right hon. Gentleman just pausing?

Jeremy Corbyn

I am pausing because you stood up.

Mr Speaker

Quite right, absolutely. That is very reasonable and sensible. Thank you. I call Mark Francois, on a point of order.

Mr Francois

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it not—[Interruption.] Well, give me a go! Is it not often the practice in this House that when someone speaking from the Dispatch Box refers to another Member and challenges them, they then normally take an intervention?

Mr Speaker

It is commonplace, but it is not, in any sense, obligatory.

Jeremy Corbyn

Thank you, Mr Speaker.

If the House backs this motion today, I will welcome the wide-ranging debates we will have about the future of our country and the future of our relationship with the European Union, with all the options on the table. As I said before, a Prime Minister confident of what she describes as “a good deal” and committed, as she claims, to tackling burning injustices should have nothing to fear from such an election. If the House does not back this motion today, it is surely incumbent on all of us to keep all the options on the table, to rule out the disastrous no deal and offer a better solution than the Prime Minister’s deal, which was so roundly defeated yesterday.

This Government cannot govern and cannot command the support of Parliament on the most important issue facing our country. Every previous Prime Minister in this situation would have resigned and called an election. It is the duty of this House to show the lead where the Government have failed, and to pass a motion of no confidence so that the people of this country can decide who their MPs are, who their Government are and who will deal with the crucial issues facing the people of this country. I commend my motion to the House.

13:37:00

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May)

Last night, the House rejected the deal the Government have negotiated with the European Union. Today, it is asked a simpler question: should the next step be a general election? I believe that is the worst thing we could do: it would deepen division when we need unity, it would bring chaos when we need certainty, and it would bring delay when we need to move forward. So I believe the House should reject this motion.

At this crucial moment in our nation's history, a general election is simply not in the national interest. Parliament decided to put the question of our membership of the European Union to the people. Parliament promised to abide by the result. Parliament invoked article 50 to trigger the process. And now Parliament must finish the job. That is what the British people expect of us and, as I find when speaking to my constituents and to voters right across the country, that is what they demand. But a general election would mean the opposite. Far from helping Parliament finish the job and fulfil our promise to the people of the United Kingdom, it would mean extending article 50 and delaying Brexit, for who knows how long.

Pete Wishart

The Prime Minister has lost a quarter of her Cabinet and 117 of her Back Benchers want her gone. She has experienced the biggest defeat in parliamentary history. What shred of credibility have her Government got left? For goodness' sake Prime Minister, won't you just go?

The Prime Minister

The hon. Gentleman might not have noticed that we are debating a vote of no confidence in the Government, so he has his opportunity to express his opinion in that vote.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con)

As someone who was defeated last night by only 230 votes, may I encourage the Prime Minister to KBO and never tire of reminding the country that our good economic and one-nation record will be put at risk by a very extreme left-wing and high-taxation party?

The Prime Minister

My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I shall speak about this later in my speech, but it is over the years since 2010, with Conservatives in government, that we have been able to turn the economy around, ensure that jobs are provided for people and give people a better future.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con)

I totally agree with the Prime Minister that a general election would solve nothing—it is merely a tactical device used by the Opposition to cause chaos—but does she agree with me that we also need to rule out a second referendum on our membership of the EU, which would be highly divisive and would not resolve the issues we currently face?

The Prime Minister

My hon. Friend is absolutely right that a general election would cause the sort of delay that I have just been talking about. He is also right in that we had a referendum in 2016, and I believe it is incumbent on this Parliament to deliver on the result of that referendum and to deliver Brexit. As regards those issues, the choices we face as a country will not change after four or five weeks of campaigning for a general election, and there is no indication that an election would solve the dilemma that we now face. Not only that, but there is no guarantee that an election would deliver a parliamentary majority for any single course of action.

Mr Francois

I thank the Prime Minister for giving way; unlike some, she is clearly not afraid to debate. It is not exactly a secret that on European policy, she and I have not seen entirely eye to eye—

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con)

She's taller than you. [Laughter.]

Mr Francois
So is everybody else!

It is possible that the Prime Minister and I will continue to disagree, but I am Conservative first and last, and I know opportunism when I see it, so when the bells ring the whole European Research Group will walk through the Lobby with her to vote this nonsense down.

The Prime Minister

I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. I note what he said and I am happy to carry on discussing with him the different views we have had on the European issue. It is absolutely clear that what the right hon. Gentleman the Leader of the Opposition is trying to do is not going to help to resolve the issue of ensuring that we deliver on Brexit for the British people.

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

In 2017, the Prime Minister went to the country and asked for a mandate; she lost her majority. Last night, she asked the House to back her deal; she saw the biggest Government defeat in a vote in the history of this House. She said last night that she wanted to open up dialogue with the whole House, yet she has refused to open up that dialogue with Labour's Front Benchers. Does she agree that it looks like a strategy more to divide and conquer than to bring this House and the country together and work out how we move forward?

The Prime Minister

I said last night that we would be having discussions across the House. There are many different opinions in the House on the issue of how to deliver Brexit; indeed, there are some views in the House on how not to deliver Brexit. I believe that we should deliver Brexit for the people. I made it clear that, should the Leader of the Opposition table a motion of no confidence, the first priority would be to debate that motion. I am confident that the Government will retain the confidence of the House. When that happens, I shall set out the further steps that we will take on discussions with Members from across the House.

The Prime Minister

If Members will just be a little patient, I have taken a number of interventions, so I will make a little progress. I will be generous in taking interventions; I think Members know from the number of hours that I have spent in the House answering questions that I am not afraid to answer questions from Members.

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

Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister

If the hon. Gentleman had listened to what I said—it does help sometimes.

We do not even know what position the Labour party would take on Brexit in an election. It is barely 18 months since this country—

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con)

On that point, will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister

If my hon. Friend would just allow me one moment.

It is barely 18 months since this country last went to the polls, in an election in which well over 80% of voters—almost 27 million people—backed parties whose manifestos promised to deliver Brexit. That is what the Government intend to do and that is what is in the national interest, not the disruption, delay and expense of a fourth national poll in less than four years.

David Morris

Does the Prime Minister agree that if the Leader of the Opposition himself wrote on a note exactly what he wanted, passed it to the Prime Minister and she adopted it, he would still vote against it?

The Prime Minister

My hon. Friend is absolutely right, because of course the position that the Leader of the Opposition took was that however good a deal for the United Kingdom the Government brought back, he would vote against it, and however bad a deal the EU offered, he would vote for it. He has no real national interest in getting the right answer for our country.

Stephen Doughty

My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition is absolutely right to call for a general election today, because it is not only the Government's record on Brexit that is at stake tonight. Let me ask the Prime Minister a direct question: is she really saying that her record on policing and crime is one that she is willing to stand on? We have seen more than 20,000 police officers cut since 2010, we see rising crime and rising knife crime, and we see money being diverted, instead of paying for police, to paying for a no-deal Brexit that nobody in this House wants to see happen.

The Prime Minister

The hon. Gentleman talks about paying for police; of course, we made more money available to police forces, and what did the Labour party do? Labour voted against that. [Interruption.] Yes, that is what Labour did—voted against it.

The Prime Minister

I will make a little more progress, then take some more interventions.

Last night the House spoke clearly, and I heard the message that it sent. I heard the concerns of my colleagues and those from across the House, and I understand them. As I told the House last night and have just repeated, if the Government secure the confidence of this House, my first priority will be to hold meetings with my colleagues, with our confidence and supply partners the Democratic Unionist party, and with senior parliamentarians from across the House, but our principles are clear: a deal that delivers a smooth and orderly exit, protecting our Union, giving us control of our borders, laws and money and allowing us to operate an independent trade policy. These are what deliver on the will of the British people.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP)

I tried this with the Prime Minister earlier during Question Time, and I am going to give her one more chance: which of the red lines that she set, which caused her defeat last night, is she willing to compromise on to get the agreement through?

The Prime Minister

The hon. Gentleman will not be surprised to hear that I will give him the same answer as I have just given in my comments. I point out to him that the key thing that this House and this Parliament need to do is to deliver Brexit for the British people. That is what we need to do. We need to deliver a Brexit that respects and reflects the vote that was taken in the 2016 referendum.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald

I am trying to be helpful to the Prime Minister, believe it or not, but this is pure robotic fantasy. It is her deal that has to change, and her deal is a product of the red lines, so when she has that meeting with my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), which of the red lines is she willing to give up on?

The Prime Minister

I repeat that we will approach the discussions in a constructive spirit. We want to hear from the House the detail of what it wants to see, such that we can secure the House's support for a deal.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con)

I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way, unlike the Leader of the Opposition. Does she share my concerns that too many people in this House are trying to scupper the mandate given to us by the British people? For centuries, this House has taken arbitrary power from kings, queens, peers and grandees and put that power in this House for the public good, but it appears that we are now becoming an arbitrary power that is removing the mandate that we gave to the British people. Will my right hon. Friend fight to deliver on that mandate and to protect and preserve our democracy?

The Prime Minister

My hon. Friend puts his point very powerfully indeed. This Parliament voted to ask the British people, and to say to them, "It is your decision." It was not to say, "Tell us what you think and we might decide afterwards whether we like it." It was, "It is your decision, and we will act on that decision."

The Prime Minister

I will just make a little more progress.

That is what we want to do: deliver on the will of the British people. As I have said, I will approach the meetings in a constructive spirit, focusing on ideas that are negotiable and have sufficient support in this House. The aim is to identify what would be required to secure the backing of the House.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab)

On that point—

The Prime Minister

I will make a little more progress. I have already been generous with interventions.

If those talks bear fruit, as I said earlier in Prime Minister's questions, then be in no doubt that I will go back to Brussels and communicate them clearly to the European Union, and that is what Members asked for. The leader of the SNP MPs said that we should have talks with all the leaders of the Opposition parties and work together in all our interests. The Chairman of the Brexit Committee said that if the deal was defeated, "I would like to think that she would take a bold step—that she would reach out across the House to look for a consensus." That is exactly what I propose to do. It would be a little strange for the Opposition to vote against that approach later today and in favour of a general election, as that would make that process of reaching out across Parliament impossible.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab)

rose—

The Prime Minister

I will give way to the hon. Lady, as she has risen several times.

Ms Angela Eagle

I thank the Prime Minister for her generosity in giving way. With all due respect to her she has come to the House today, after suffering a very, very large defeat indeed, with the same lines and she is making the same assertions as she was making before the vote—it is as if the vote never happened. Her Downing Street spokesperson said that any discussions would have to start and proceed from the red lines that she herself established. Does she not realise, in all honesty, that the time has come for her to show some flexibility on those red lines and get us into a genuine discussion rather than just repeating the lines that we have heard for the past five months ad nauseam?

The Prime Minister

What I am doing is setting out what the British people voted for in the referendum in 2016, and it is our duty as a Parliament to deliver on that.

Mr Dhesi

rose—

The Prime Minister

Again, I will just make a little progress.

I know that to serve in Government is a unique privilege. The people of this country put their trust in you and, in return, you have the opportunity to make this country a better place for them.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con)

Will my hon. Friend give way?

The Prime Minister

In a moment.

When I became Prime Minister that is what I pledged to do. Yes, to deliver Brexit, but also to govern on the side of working people, right across the country, for whom life is harder than it should be and to build on the progress that has been made since 2010.

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

I thank the Prime Minister for giving way. The problem is that she seems to be talking as if she lost by 30 votes yesterday and not 230. Her refusal even to consider changing any of her red lines, when the EU, the Irish Government and others made it clear that the deal that she got was dependent on those red lines, is making this impossible. May I ask her to clarify this: is she saying that she will rule out, in any circumstances, a customs union?

The Prime Minister

What I want to see is what the British people voted for—[Interruption.] No, this is very important. They voted for an end to free movement; they voted for an independent trade policy; and they voted to end the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. It is incumbent on this Parliament to ensure that we deliver on that.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con)

rose—

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con)
rose—

The Prime Minister
I give way.

Mr Clarke
rose—

The Prime Minister
If the Father of the House would allow me, I did say to my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) that I would take him first.

Kevin Hollinrake
I thank the Prime Minister for giving way. She is being criticised for setting and sticking to red lines, but do not those red lines simply represent the promises that were made before the referendum?

The Prime Minister
That is the point that I have been making and repeating. When people voted to leave, they voted for certain things. They voted to ensure that we could have that independent trade policy and that we would end free movement, for example, and it is our duty to ensure that we deliver on those things.

Mr Kenneth Clarke
I have asked many people throughout this why they voted on one side or the other in the referendum, and I have got a very wide range of replies. I have to say, though, that no one has ever told me that they voted to leave in order that we could leave the customs union, or that they wanted us to erect trade barriers between ourselves and the rest of the Europe. As the Prime Minister is as committed to this as I am, I entirely support her aim of keeping open borders between ourselves and the rest of Europe. Is it not the case that there is nowhere in the world where two developed countries in any populated area are able to have an open border unless they have some form of customs union?

The Prime Minister
My right hon. and learned Friend refers to the fact that, obviously, there were various reasons why people voted to leave the European Union, but when they were doing so they did vote to ensure that we continue to have a good trading relationship with our nearest neighbours in the European Union and also to improve our trading relationships with others around the world. That is what we were searching for and that is what was in the political declaration for the future. That package was not voted through this House last night. I now will talk to parliamentarians across the House to determine where we can secure the support of the House.

Although delivering Brexit is an important and key element of government, it is also important that we build on the progress made since 2010 and lead this country towards the brighter, fairer, more prosperous future that it deserves.

Mr Dhesi
rose—

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

rose—

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD)

rose—

The Prime Minister

I will make some progress before I take any further interventions.

I believe that this Government have a record to be proud of—a record that demonstrates that our policies and principles are more than words. In 2010, we inherited the gravest of economic situations: a recession in which almost three quarters of a million jobs were lost; a budget deficit of £1 borrowed for every £4 spent; and a welfare system that did not reward work. But in the nine years since, thanks to the hard work and sacrifice of the British people, we have turned this country around. Our economy is growing; the deficit is down by four fifths; the national debt has begun its first sustained fall for a generation; and the financial burden left for our children and grandchildren is shrinking by the day. That is a record to be proud of.

Mr Dhesi

I thank the Prime Minister for allowing me to intervene. Under her leadership, this Government have become the first in British history to be found in contempt of Parliament, and the first in British history to lose by more than 200 votes on a primary policy matter. Homelessness has spiralled out of control, the use of food banks has risen exponentially, and much more besides. Surely it is now time to act with humility and to do the right and honourable thing: resign and call a general election.

The Prime Minister

May I say again that the whole point of this debate today is to determine whether this House has confidence in the Government or thinks that there should be a general election?

I say that our record is one that we should be proud of, but I know that that is not enough. A strong economy alone is no good, unless we use it to build a fairer society: one where, whoever you are, wherever you live, and at every stage of your life, you know that the Government are on your side; where growing up you will get the best possible education, not because your parents can afford to pay for it but because that is what every local school provides; where your parents have a secure job that pays a decent wage and where they get to keep more of the money they earn each month; where, when you finish school, you know that you can go to university, whether or not your parents went, or you can have an apprenticeship; where, when you want to buy your first home, enough houses are being built so that you can afford to get a foot on the housing ladder; where, when you want to get married, it does not matter whether you fall in love with someone of the same sex or opposite; where, when you have children of your own, you will be able to rely on our world-class NHS; where both parents can share their leave to look after their baby and where, when they are ready to go back to work, the Government will help with the costs of childcare; and where, when you have worked hard all your life, you will get a good pension and security and dignity in your old age. That is what this Government are delivering.

Wera Hobhouse

I thank the Prime Minister for giving way. I acknowledge that she wants to paint a good picture of her Government, but is it not true that, precisely because so many people were unhappy, they also voted for Brexit? Is it not the case that we need to clarify with the British people what exactly they voted for? We need to put a precise deal in front of them, and not just make a general assumption about why people voted for Brexit. People also voted for Brexit because they were genuinely

unhappy with the state of this country, so is it not the case that we now need to put a precise Brexit deal in front of the people so that everyone can say that, actually, Brexit will make a difference?

The Prime Minister

The hon. Lady might recall that I made exactly that point when I became Prime Minister—that there were various reasons that people voted for Brexit, but that some people wanted a change in the way in which politics delivered for them. They felt that politicians were not listening to them, which is precisely why it is so important that we listen to and deliver on the result of the referendum for the people of this country—and this Government are delivering in a whole range of ways.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con)

I appreciate the positive, confident and optimistic picture of the future of the UK painted by the Prime Minister. What a contrast with the Leader of the Opposition, who takes every opportunity to talk Britain down. How on earth can somebody claim that they aspire to be Prime Minister if they have such utter lack of confidence in Britain and the British people?

The Prime Minister

Absolutely. Anybody who wants to be Prime Minister should believe in this country and in the talents of our people; that is so important.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con)

I know that there is so little time to get in all the achievements—[Laughter.] Colleagues may laugh, but it is this Government who are taking the environment more seriously than any other Government. We are putting sustainability first, and that is more important even than Brexit, because if we did not have a healthy environment—our record on this is second to none, including measures on microbeads, ancient woodland protection, the clean air strategy and more—we would be lost.

The Prime Minister

I thank my hon. Friend, who has set out an area on which this Government have been taking important action. I commend the work that she has done and the work of my right hon. Friend the Environment Secretary in this area. We are leading the way on the environment in a number of ways.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con)

I am very grateful to the Prime Minister; she is giving way considerably more than the Leader of the Opposition did. She has just mentioned the stewardship of the NHS under her leadership. Would she like to remind the Leader of the Opposition that it is this Government who have just pledged, through the NHS long-term plan, 50% per annum more funding than he pledged at the last general election?

The Prime Minister

That is absolutely right. The biggest cash boost to the NHS in its history and a long-term plan that ensures its sustainability for the future—that is being delivered not by a Labour party, but by the Conservatives in government.

The Prime Minister

If hon. and right hon. Members will forgive me, I am conscious that the time is getting on.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab)

indicated assent.

The Prime Minister

The right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) is encouraging me not to take so many interventions and to get on with my speech.

We are building a country that works for everyone, but there is much more to do, including: investing in our industrial strategy so that we are creating the jobs of the future in all parts of our country, not just London and the south-east; delivering our long-term plan for the NHS, to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) has just referred, so that our most precious institution is equipped for the future; tackling the lingering injustices that for too long have blighted the lives of too many people, including women being paid less than men, mental health not being treated with the same seriousness and resource as physical health, a criminal justice system that has poorer outcomes if you are black than if you are white, and an education system that has left white working-class boys as less likely to go to university than anyone else. These are issues that we need to tackle, and the mission of this Government will not stop.

This is a Government building a country that is more prosperous, a country that is fairer and a country that works for everyone. With the confidence of this House, we will go on delivering for Britain, driven by a passionate belief in doing what is right for our country and right for our people, acting not in self-interest but in the national interest. That is the simple mission that has underpinned our approach to the Brexit negotiations.

As we enter the next stage of that process, I have made it clear that I want to engage with colleagues across the House. The question now is whether the Labour leadership will rise to the occasion, but I fear the answer is no. As the Labour leader himself has indicated, Brexit is the biggest issue that the House and the country have faced for generations. It demands responsible leadership and pragmatic statesmanship from senior politicians. The Leader of the Opposition, as yet, has shown neither. His failure to set out a clear and consistent alternative solution to the Brexit question is the third reason that this House should comprehensively reject this motion.

The shadow Brexit Secretary has described Labour's position on Brexit as one of "constructive ambiguity". I think that the shadow Trade Secretary called it something slightly more succinct but definitely not parliamentary, and I therefore cannot repeat it. I call it not being straight with the British people. For more than two years, the Leader of the Opposition has been either unable or unwilling to share anything other than vague aspirations, empty slogans and ideas with no grounding in reality. When the President of the European Commission said that Labour's Brexit ambitions would be impossible for the European Commission to agree to, the right hon. Gentleman simply shrugged and said, "That's his view. I have a different view."

Last night, just for a moment, I thought the Leader of the Opposition might surprise us all, because he told this House that it was not enough to vote against the withdrawal agreement and that

"we also have to be for something."—[Official Report, 15 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 1109.]

Surely that was the moment. That was the point at which, after months of demanding that I stand aside and make way for him, he was going to reveal his alternative. We waited, but nothing came.

The Leader of the Opposition still faces both ways on whether Labour would keep freedom of movement, and he will not even be drawn on the most basic point of all. In PMQs, I referred to the fact that on Sunday, when challenged as to whether he would campaign to leave the European Union if there were a general election, he refused to answer that question five times, and he has

refused to answer that question in response to Members of this House today. The Government have no doubts about our position. Under this Government, the United Kingdom will leave the European Union and we will respect the decision of the people.

Chris Philp

The Prime Minister is quite right to point out the yawning chasm at the heart of Labour's policy, but the problem is that she also said that we need to come up with a constructive alternative. Speaking to colleagues around the House, it strikes me powerfully that there is one element of the currently proposed deal that, if changed, would make it much more likely to pass: the backstop. Would the Prime Minister therefore consider contacting European Commission officials in the coming days and over the weekend to ask them to make legally binding changes to that backstop, which would mean that the deal would then have a very good chance of passing this House?

The Prime Minister

The purpose of the various discussions that we are going to have is to identify the issues that will secure the support of this House, and I will take those issues to the European Parliament.

Peter Kyle

Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister

I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, and then I am going to make progress so that others can speak in this debate.

Peter Kyle

I am extremely grateful to the Prime Minister for giving way; she has been generous. She has talked about engagement with this House and yesterday she referred to this House as the "fulcrum of our democracy." May I gently point out that she is the Prime Minister who went to the Supreme Court to stop her having engagement with this House, and that the vote that we had yesterday was on the back of an amendment that she voted against? She talks about engagement with this House, but we have experienced nothing but hostility from the Prime Minister. Going forward, will she put her words into action? If not, she does not deserve to have the job in the first place.

The Prime Minister

The hon. Gentleman has been present on many occasions when I have come to listen to and answer questions from the House. In fact, from October through to December, that amounted to a whole 24 hours spent answering questions in this House.

Vital though Brexit is, there is much more to being the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. That is, after all, the job to which the Leader of the Opposition aspires.

Anna Soubry

Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister

If my right hon. Friend will bear with me, I will make some progress, as I understand that a significant number of Members have put in to speak.

By putting forward this motion, the Leader of the Opposition is asking this House to accept that he could be the next Prime Minister. How would he have faced some of the big challenges that I have faced as Prime Minister over the last two and a half years? When Russia launched a chemical attack

on the streets of Salisbury, I worked with our allies to degrade Russian intelligence capabilities and hold those responsible to account. His contribution was to suggest that we ask Russia to double-check the findings of our own scientists. When the Syrian regime used chemical weapons to murder innocent men, women and children in Douma, I stood with our allies to uphold the international consensus that the use of chemical weapons should not be tolerated. He wanted to give an effective veto on action to President Putin and the Russian Government—the very Government who were supporting the Syrian regime.

The leader of the party of Attlee called for the dismantling of NATO. The leader of the party of Bevan says that Britain should unilaterally disarm herself and cross our fingers that others follow suit. The leader of the party that helped to deliver the Belfast agreement invited IRA terrorists into this Parliament just weeks after their colleagues had murdered a Member of this House. His leadership of the Labour party has been a betrayal of everything that party has stood for, a betrayal of the vast majority of his MPs and a betrayal of millions of decent and patriotic Labour voters. I look across the House and see Back-Bench Members who have spent years serving their country in office in a Labour Government, but I fear that today, it is simply not the party that many of its own MPs joined.

If we want to see what the Leader of the Opposition would do to our country, we can do no better than look at what he has done to his party. Before he became Labour leader, nobody could have imagined that a party which had fought so hard against discrimination could become the banner under which racists and bigots whose world view is dominated by a hatred of Jews could gather, but that is exactly what has happened under his leadership. British Jewish families who have lived here for generations are asking themselves where they should go if he ever becomes Prime Minister; that is what has happened under his leadership. A Jewish Labour MP had to hire a bodyguard to attend her own party conference, under the leadership of the right hon. Gentleman. What he has done to his party is a national tragedy. What he would do to our country would be a national calamity.

Anna Soubry

I am grateful to the Prime Minister for being so generous and engaging in a debate. As ever, she could teach a few people lessons on that. The hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) made a very important point. While the Prime Minister has been very generous in coming to this place and answering questions, the complaint is that we have been excluded in a meaningful way at the outset from helping to determine the principles upon which a Brexit deal should be negotiated.

In seeking to be true to our oath and promises to our constituents and voting for things against our own Government, many of us have been threatened with deselection or received threats against our safety and even death threats. I know how seriously the Prime Minister takes that, and I thank her for her kindness in the note she sent me last week. Will she now make it clear to those listening to this that it would be wrong for anybody—this applies also to Opposition Members, given the wise observations she has just made about the state of the Labour party—to be intimidated or bullied in any way simply for coming here and being true to what they believe in and what they believe is in the national interest?

The Prime Minister

What my right hon. Friend experienced last week was appalling. I understand that she has experienced other incidents more recently. I absolutely agree; everybody in this House holds their opinions and views with passion and commitment, and everybody in this House should be able to express those views with passion and commitment and not feel that they will be subject to intimidation, harassment or bullying. That is very important, and I am sure that that sentiment

commands approval across the whole House. Once again, I am sorry for the experiences my right hon. Friend has gone through.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab)
Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister
I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman, and then I will conclude.

Liam Byrne
I am grateful to the Prime Minister for giving way. She must recognise that she has built a cage of red lines, which produced a deal that was overwhelmingly rejected by this House. We rejected the deal because we rejected the cage. This afternoon, she has yielded nothing about how any one of those red lines will change. If she is not prepared to change, how on earth can we in this House continue to place a shred of confidence in her?

The Prime Minister
The point I made last night and have repeatedly made today is that I will be talking to people across this House—to my own colleagues, to the DUP and to other parties, as there are different groups of people in this House who have different views on this issue—to find what will secure the confidence and support of this House for the way in which we deliver Brexit.

It was serendipitous that I allowed the right hon. Gentleman to intervene just at the point at which I was going to say that if the Leader of the Opposition wins his vote tonight, what he would attempt to do is damage our country and wreck our economy. Of course, it was the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) who left that note saying, “There’s no money left” after the last Labour Government.

Liam Byrne
I was naive to honour a Treasury tradition that went back to Churchill with a text that is pretty much the same, but I was proud to be part of a team that stopped a recession becoming a depression. This is the Government who—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker
Order. Stop trying to shout other Members down. Calm yourselves.

Liam Byrne
The Prime Minister was a member of the party that backed Labour’s spending plans up to late 2009, and she has presided over a Government who have doubled the size of the national debt.

The Prime Minister
We did see what was happening in terms of the financial crisis and its impact, but the Labour party in government had failed to take the steps to ensure that the country was in a position to deal with those issues.

What would we see if Labour won the vote tonight? It would wreck our economy, spread division and undermine our national security. As I said earlier, on the biggest question of our times, the Leader of the Opposition provides no answers, no way forward and nothing but evasion, contradiction and political games. This House cannot and must not allow it.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab)

Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister

I am about to conclude, so I will not take any more interventions.

We are living through a historic moment in our nation's history. Following a referendum that divided our nation in half, we dearly need to bring our country back together. Last night's vote showed that we have a long way to go, but I do not believe that a general election is the path to doing that, and I do not believe that a Government led by the Leader of the Opposition is the path to doing that either. We must find the answer among ourselves in this House, and, with the confidence of the House, this Government will lead that process.

This is the Government who have already delivered record employment, put more money in the pockets of ordinary working people and given the NHS the biggest cash boost it has ever received from any Government of any colour. This is the Government who are fighting the burning injustices of poverty, inequality and discrimination, which for too long have blighted the lives of too many of our people. This is the Government who are building a country that works for everyone.

As we leave the European Union, we must raise our sights to the kind of country we want to be—a nation that can respond to a call from its people for change; a nation that can build a better future for every one of its people; and a nation that knows that moderation and pragmatism are not dirty words, but how we work together to improve people's lives. That is our mission. That is what we are doing, and, with the backing of the House, it is what we will continue to do. I am proud of what we have achieved so far, and I am determined that the work will go on. In that, I know that we have the confidence of the country. We now ask for the confidence of this House. Reject this motion.

14:19:00

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

It is a pleasure to follow the Prime Minister. Of course, I wish her no ill will and, if she does choose to resign today, may I wish her all the best for her future career?

In many respects, we should not be having this debate. If we reflect on what happened last night, we see a Government who brought their Brexit deal before Parliament and lost by a majority of 230—something quite unprecedented—with the Prime Minister's own Back Benchers and the Opposition, in a united manner, voting against this Government. If we go back just a short few weeks to December, there was of course a motion of confidence within the Conservative party and in that situation a majority of Government Back Benchers voted against the Prime Minister. The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) said earlier in an intervention that the members of the ERG would be going through the Lobby to support the Government tonight. That says it all. It is the ERG that has captured the Prime Minister.

The reality of where we stand today is that, when the Prime Minister went to the United Kingdom in an election in 2017, in anticipation of getting a majority, the Conservatives got a bloody nose and she came back as a minority Prime Minister. [Interruption.] Well, you can only—

The Prime Minister

rose—

Ian Blackford

I will give way in a moment. [Interruption.] I say to those on the Government Benches, if they would just settle down a little, that they would love to be in the position that the Scottish National party is in because we have a majority of seats from the people of Scotland.

The Prime Minister

I thought perhaps the right hon. Gentleman could just inform the House: how many seats in Westminster—how many Westminster MPs—did the SNP have before the 2017 election and how many did they have after the 2017 election?

Ian Blackford

I am grateful to the Prime Minister for that intervention. I say to her that there are 59 seats in Scotland, the Scottish National party hold 35 of them—a majority of seats—and we have won every election to the Scottish Parliament since 2007. The Prime Minister could only dream of being a situation where she has a majority.

Let us come back to the fundamentals of this. We have a Prime Minister who is captured by her right-wing Brexiteers. The issue is, when you have a minority, you have to be able to work across party. We have a situation where the Prime Minister is beholden to the DUP, but the DUP will support her only in very certain circumstances.

This is not just about the defeat of the Government on Brexit last night. They are a Government who are stuck and cannot get their legislative programme through. They have no majority support in this House. They are a Government who are past their time. If the Government had any humility or self-respect, they would reflect on the scale of that defeat last night. We should not be having this motion of no confidence. The Government should recognise that they have no moral authority. The Government, quite simply, should go.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con)

I think the right hon. Gentleman's speech is a little eccentric because he seems to think that the ERG and the DUP control the Prime Minister. Why, then, did 120 of us vote against the Prime Minister yesterday? If we are in such control, we are clearly not doing it very well.

Ian Blackford

Let me explain. The hon. Gentleman, in supporting a motion of no confidence against the Prime Minister, as he did, clearly expressed that he does not have confidence in the Prime Minister. What the ERG is seeking to do is to make sure that the Government deliver what it wants, which is a hard Brexit—a no-deal Brexit perhaps—against the interests of the majority of the people in the United Kingdom.

Here is the reality. Having listened very carefully to what the Prime Minister has said today, there is no change to the Government's position. The red lines remain in place. I fear that what is really going on is that we have a Government who are seeking to run down the clock, safe in the knowledge that the withdrawal Act has gone through, and seeking to drive Parliament to the margins and to make sure that we do crash out of the European Union, with no deal as a serious prospect. All of us should recognise the risks of no deal that no sane person in this House would support. The Government should unilaterally take off the table that risk to all of us and all our constituents.

Imran Hussain

The right hon. Gentleman must agree that the Prime Minister is a record setter—record levels of poverty, record levels of homelessness and now a record defeat: no Government have been defeated

by such a majority before. Perhaps not in our lifetime, but does he think that majority will ever be beaten?

Ian Blackford

I would say to my hon. Friend, because he is my hon. Friend, that we see a record level of lack of humility from this Government. He is absolutely right. We have had 10 years of austerity from this Government and people are hurting. We can see that through the poverty figures and the increase in poverty that is forecast. The harsh reality, as we know from the Government's own analysis, is that the economy of the United Kingdom would be weaker in any version of Brexit than it would be if we stayed in the European Union. That is the fundamental point.

I say respectfully to the Prime Minister that I understand the issue of respecting the vote in 2016 but, when the Government know that the economic circumstances of their citizens are going to be negatively affected, we have a responsibility to say to the people, on the basis of the information that we now have, "We have a duty to go back to you" because nobody—nobody—irrespective of how they voted in that referendum, voted to make themselves poorer. I say with respect to the Prime Minister that it is shameful that we are not being honest with the people of this country. We need to waken up.

Let us take the announcement from Jaguar Land Rover. I know there are many reasons why Jaguar Land Rover is restructuring—we know it is to do with diesel cars and with China—but, at the same time, Jaguar Land Rover has made it absolutely crystal clear that Brexit is a fundamental issue driving that restructuring. No Government should be in the situation where they want to put unemployment on the table, with unemployment a price worth paying. That is what happened under Thatcher and this Government at their peril will take risks with the economy and the livelihoods of the people in the United Kingdom.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC)

Has not the time come for the country to see that the Tory party—not by its words, but by its actions—is now enacting a policy of moving us towards a no-deal Brexit?

Ian Blackford

I am grateful to my dear and honourable Friend for that point because I have to say to this House and to the people of the United Kingdom, that I am worried—I am really worried—about what we are doing. The risk of a no deal is unthinkable.

Ian Blackford

With respect, I know many people want to speak and I have to make progress. I will take interventions later.

We have to be honest with people about what these risks are. I can say to this House that we in Scotland want no part of it. If the Government and the Prime Minister want to drive the bus over the cliff, we will not be in the passenger seat with this Government.

We often hear about the travails of the European Union—the nasty European Union—but I can tell the House, as someone who lives in the islands of Scotland, that the European Union has been fantastic for our region. When I contrast the behaviour of the European Union with this Government, people in the highlands are right to be angry. The European Union agreed to give convergence uplift funds to our farmers and crofters on the basis of the low level of financial support that was in place. A total of £160 million should be handed over to Scottish crofters. Where is it? It has not been handed over. Where has the Secretary of State for Scotland been in defending

the interests of Scottish farmers and Scottish crofters? Scottish farmers and crofters will pay a heavy price for Brexit, and the institution that has been standing up and wanting to support them is not this House or this Government, but the European Union. I know where I will put my—

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

I first thank the right hon. Gentleman for letting his party give me a seat in this place, but that is not for today. What he says is quite correct, and he touches on a question I put to the Prime Minister yesterday. So many infrastructure projects in my constituency would not have happened had it not been for European money. Those projects were crucial in halting the terrible drain of our brightest and best who left the highlands and never returned home. That issue remains hugely important to me.

Ian Blackford

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I say to him that the people of Caithness and Sutherland gave him a seat in this place. We all serve with the good will and ongoing support of our constituents, which no one should ever take for granted.

Ian Blackford

I want to make progress; I apologise.

I have talked about Brexit. Let me move on to the record of this Government. The Prime Minister talked about delivering a fairer society. Oh my goodness. Those of us who live in the highlands, which was a pilot area for universal credit, have seen the damage it has done to many people in many of our communities. I look at my hon. Friends the Members for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry). Day after day, week after week, they have had to stand up and highlight the issues with universal credit, the issues with the rape clause and the issues with the two-child policy. This Government simply have not listened to the damage that has been done. They are obsessed with imposing a cruel and hostile environment for immigrants, their families and their children, and they continue to deny the rights of 1950s women.

When I first came into the House, I was the SNP pensions spokesperson. I lost count of the number of debates I called and spoke in, highlighting the injustice faced by millions of women—women who had worked all their lives in anticipation that there was a contract between them and the state that they would get their state pension. In some cases, women were given as little as 14 months' notice that their pensionable age was going to increase by as much as six years. That shows the heartlessness and the cruelty of this Government, who left many of them in poverty by ripping up the contract—that is what it was—between those individuals and the state. I have appealed to the Prime Minister on many occasions to right that wrong. This Government could easily have put their hand into the Treasury coffers; the national insurance fund sits at a surplus.

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP)

Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is appalling that this Government have slipped out, among all the Brexit news, the news that they are making further changes to pensions? Pensioners with a partner below the pensionable age will have to claim universal credit instead of pension credit.

Ian Blackford

My hon. Friend is correct to highlight that this Government have been sneaking out those kinds of announcements. She is a doughty fighter for pensioners, as she is for young people, and we will stand up in this House for those who are affected in that way.

Kevin Hollinrake
rose—

Ian Blackford
I will give way one more time.

Kevin Hollinrake
The right hon. Gentleman said earlier that he is worried about economic growth. I share those concerns, but is he also worried that Scottish economic growth is slowing? The Scottish economy is now growing at half the rate of the rest of the UK. What is his party doing about that north of the border?

Ian Blackford
Oh good grief. I have to say that the hon. Gentleman is mistaken. Over the course of the last year, growth in Scotland has overtaken that of the United Kingdom. But the majority of the controls of the Scottish economy do not sit with the Scottish Government; they sit with the Government here in London. We would dearly love to have full control of our destiny in Scotland. One of the reasons we desire independence is that our economic interests simply have not been looked after by Westminster.

Ian Blackford
I will give way in a second, but let me just say this. When I look at Scotland in the rear-view mirror over the past 100 years, I see that our population has barely grown. Generations of young people have had to leave Scotland because of a lack of economic opportunity. The Scottish Government are not responsible for that; Westminster is. I am delighted that a report published in the past few days by Highlands and Islands Enterprise shows that, for the first time, the trend has turned around and young people are staying to live in the highlands. That is because of the investment the Scottish Government are making in young people, despite the challenges of the austerity we face from this Conservative Government.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP)
I hope that the motion tabled by the Leader of the Opposition is successful this evening. I was reminded that today is the anniversary of one of the first Home Rule Bills for Ireland, which was agreed by this House in 1913 but defeated in the other place. Yet again—I say this with due deference—the Democratic Unionist party is in control of the Government. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that if the motion succeeds this evening, the Scottish National party will have no truck with any Government funding the Democratic Unionist party and its type of politics?

Ian Blackford
There is a very simple answer to that: yes, of course.

Ian Blackford
I have been generous in taking interventions. I need to move on, because I am only on page 2 of my notes. I am sure hon. Members want me to make some progress.

The Prime Minister and the Conservative Government have let us all down. Westminster has proved once again that it can only let Scotland down. The Scottish National party has no confidence in the UK Government. Scotland voted to remain. Let me say that again: Scotland voted to remain. I often hear the Prime Minister and others talking about the national interest. I ask her to reflect on the fact that our nation of Scotland is in a family of nations. We were told in 2014 that if we stayed in the United Kingdom our rights as European citizens would be respected, but this Government

have completely ignored the wishes of the Scottish people and want to drag us out of the European Union against our will. They want to take away the rights we have as EU citizens.

It can be no surprise that the contempt shown to Scotland by the Tories over the past couple of years has strengthened and reinforced the case for Scotland to be an independent country. Every reasonable attempt by the Scottish Government to compromise and protect Scotland's interests has been spurned. The powers of the Scottish Parliament have been eroded. This place has taken back control. [Interruption.] I hear scoffing from the Tory Benches, but SNP membership went up by 10,000 the day after the withdrawal Act went through. The people of Scotland know that the Secretary of State for Scotland sat and did nothing as Scotland's powers over fishing, farming, agriculture and the environment were taken back, against the wishes of the Scottish Government.

Ian Blackford

I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald). [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker

Order. The House is over-excited. Although the right hon. Gentleman is well able to look after himself, he must be heard. Sometimes there is a concerted and excessively noisy apparent attempt to interrupt, and that should not happen.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald

They are a curious bunch, Mr Speaker. I ask my right hon. Friend and Members across the House to reflect on the fact that, sure, in 2014 the Scottish people voted to stay in the UK, but two years later they voted to stay in the EU. Those two things are fundamentally incompatible because of the Prime Minister's desire to drag us out, so at some point one will have to give. She might be able to delay that, but independence is inevitable, is it not?

Ian Blackford

It's coming yet for a' that. [Interruption.] I hear Tory Members from a sedentary position talking about whether we can demand a referendum. I say to them that the sovereignty of the people of Scotland must be respected. However they dress it up, when the Scottish National party went to the people of Scotland in 2016, we won the election and a mandate such that, if there were a material change of circumstances, we could seek to have a referendum on independence. There is a majority for that in the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh. In July, this House debated a motion on the claim of right that recognised the sovereignty of the Scottish people. This House accepted that motion. If and when the Scottish Government come to Westminster and ask for a section 30 agreement, this Government should respect the democracy and the sovereignty of the Scottish people and allow it.

Scotland will never forget or forgive the utter contempt shown for our nation by this Prime Minister and this Government. The right hon. Lady and her Government cannot escape the reality that they have caused political collapse in this country. Hamstrung, this Government are completely frozen in their own failure. We have reached a dangerous impasse. With the clock ticking down, we need to remove this shambolic Conservative Government, extend article 50 and, yes, give the people of the United Kingdom a say.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP)

As ever, my right hon. Friend is giving a stunning account of the current situation. Does he agree that the Prime Minister has painted herself into this corner? She will have to give on at least some of her red lines, and it is deeply regrettable that she has waited until the 11th hour to reach out across the House. History will judge her on her deeds, not her words.

Ian Blackford

I absolutely agree. I reflect on the fact that we in Scotland have a Parliament elected by proportional representation. We are used to minority Government and having to reach consensus. Indeed, the motion on Brexit that was passed by the Scottish Parliament was supported by the Scottish National party, by the Labour party, by the Liberal Democrats and by the Greens. I say to the Prime Minister: that is how you do it. The Prime Minister has simply misunderstood the challenges of reaching a consensus across Parliament. She is working with her own Brexit extremists and failing to work to build a consensus across this Parliament. If the Prime Minister survives today, she must act now to extend article 50 and legislate for a people's vote.

I must now turn to the Labour party. The Scottish National party was the first to table a motion of no confidence, supported by others—the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and the Green party—and we asked for it to be debated before Christmas. We knew yesterday that the Government were giving active consideration to allowing a debate and a vote today on that motion. The Labour party has been shamed into tabling the motion before the House now—a motion that we should have discussed before Christmas. I welcome today's debate, but on the basis of what happens today, I make this appeal to our friends and colleagues in the Labour party: we have to work together to hold this Government to account, and if we are to do that, we have to recognise the harm that Brexit will do to all our constituents. It is time for the Leader of the Opposition to recognise that there is no such thing as a "jobs first" Brexit.

If we want to protect the interests of our citizens, there has to be a people's vote. We do not have time to delay. The Labour party has to join us in that campaign today. I say to the Leader of the Opposition that all the young people who voted Labour in England in 2017 will pay the price if he does not give that leadership. Get off that fence and come and join us. Take that opportunity today, and tell us once and for all that Labour will back a people's vote.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con)

I am honoured by the right hon. Gentleman giving way to me, and I am grateful to him. He mentioned the shame of the Labour party. Will he reflect on the shame of the Scottish National party in Edinburgh on a day when college lecturers in Scotland are striking and teachers in Scotland are considering industrial action, when waiting lists are going up and our educational standards are going down? That is the record of the SNP Government in Scotland. Is he ashamed of that as well?

Ian Blackford

The hon. Gentleman used to sit in the Scottish Parliament. I suggest that if he wants to debate devolved matters, he tries to get back his seat there. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker

Order. You always have a very amiable disposition, Mr Kerr, but you are becoming a mildly exuberant denizen of the House—dare I say it, in your conduct even a tad eccentric, to deploy the word used by the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg). Now, calm, Zen, restraint. Try to cultivate the air of the elder statesman.

Ian Blackford

Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am proud of the record of investment in public services by my Government in Scotland. The situation we face is that of austerity from Westminster. We have taken the hard decisions to ameliorate Tory austerity, but also to invest in our public services. It is the Tories in the Scottish Parliament who want to cut taxes and harden austerity, which will damage the interests of the people of Scotland.

The people of Scotland wish to remain in the European Union. We want a country of opportunity, a nation free from poverty, a country where immigrants are welcome and refugees are given refuge. We want a Scotland without austerity, a Scotland where pensioners are paid their fair share and workers have fair and equal pay—a real living wage. We want a Scotland where all children are treated equally, where our health service is protected and valued—a nation that will be healthier, wealthier and happier.

The choice is clear. The United Kingdom is on a path to self-destruction. Without a change of course, Brexit will result in our economy being smaller, weaker and poorer. The Bank of England's Mark Carney said that Brexit had already cost each family £600. That is what has already happened. We know that a hard Brexit will cost each household in Scotland £1,600, pushing struggling families to the brink and, already, poor families into destitution. Without single market and customs union membership, the future relationship can only be a free-trade agreement, introducing barriers to Scottish companies' ability to trade. That will damage jobs, investment, productivity and earnings, hitting the most disadvantaged in society hardest. As we know, people who choose to live and work in this country, on these islands, are net contributors to our economy. If net migration is reduced by a significant number, we will be poorer economically and fiscally. That would be catastrophic, not just for workers but for our economy.

After a decade of Tory austerity, our economy has already suffered enough. The SNP will not stand by and allow the UK Government to ride roughshod over Scotland's future. This Government must go, and they must go today. I have said it before, and our First Minister of Scotland has reiterated it today, that the only way for Scotland to protect its interests and for our nation to thrive is once and forever to be rid of this place, and instead be an independent nation in the European Union.

Mr Speaker

Order. On account of the level of demand, a five-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches will now apply.

14:48:00

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con)

When my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was winding up the debate yesterday evening, she said that our country could ultimately make a success of no deal—although she of course was emphasising that she did not believe that that was the best outcome. That was before the vote. The outcome of the vote a few minutes later is one to which the Prime Minister certainly must respond.

The feeling in this House—432 Members, of whom I was one—is that the Prime Minister's deal, however good she thinks it is, is a bad deal, and I have heard nothing from the Prime Minister that implies that she accepts the verdict given by the House last night that her deal is a bad deal. The Prime Minister was right to anticipate such a scenario. In her Lancaster House speech two years ago, she feared that the European Union would only offer us a bad deal—a punishment deal, as she put it. She therefore emphasised that no deal would be better than a bad deal, and she emphasised all the benefits that come from a no deal—including our ability to trade freely across the world and our ability to be able to enter into a new economic model—and from being masters of our own destiny as an independent nation. Those were the benefits of no deal that she set out. Obviously she, like everyone else, wanted to get a good deal. As we have not got a good deal, I plead with my right hon. Friend to ensure that she does not close the option of no deal and, indeed, intensifies preparations for no deal. That is the best way of concentrating the minds of those in the European Union that we are serious about an alternative.

If someone goes into a negotiation and says, “The only alternatives are to accept the deal or stay in the European Union”, what will happen? The European Union is holding us to ransom. We need to be saying that we are confident, we believe in ourselves and we can make a great success of no deal. Unfortunately, that has not been the negotiating stance of the Prime Minister and her advisers, and we are suffering as a consequence.

Last Saturday, I had a public meeting in my constituency attended by more than 200 people. A lot of anxiety was expressed about whether the Brexit we have been promised will be delivered. It was great to hear the Prime Minister reasserting her commitment to deliver Brexit, but if she does not deliver that with the deal that was rejected last night, how will she deliver it if she rejects the no-deal alternative? My constituents were worried that they could see the referendum commitment to leaving the European Union somehow being undermined by the Prime Minister and the Government. That in turn was undermining their trust.

George Freeman

My hon. Friend is making a compelling case that we should go back to Europe and renegotiate. He knows that we are at the end of the process and time is running out. He also knows, and I think regrets, that we are not ready for no deal. Is he not actually making a case to extend article 50 to get the right deal that he will support?

Sir Christopher Chope

No, I am not. Two years ago, we were told by the Prime Minister that nothing was agreed until everything was agreed and that everything was going to be agreed within two years. We now know that effectively nothing has been agreed, certainly as far as the future relationship is concerned. Just trying to buy more time will not solve the problem; we need to leave the European Union on 29 March and then we can have negotiations following on from that where we will be standing on a level playing field and able to stand up for our own interests. We will have called the European Union’s bluff. It is trying to undermine our ability to be able to do what we want.

If someone is unsuccessful in a conflict, we expect the victor to impose conditions on the vanquished. What is happening here is that the European Union is seeking to impose conditions on us because we have the temerity to want to leave the European Union. That is wholly unacceptable and the Government’s negotiating position has been supine throughout.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con)

In terms of imposing conditions, if we go to no deal we will go immediately to default WTO terms, including tariffs on lamb exporters, for example, of 40%, and we will not have a Trade Bill—it will not pass at the moment—to enable us even to do anything about it. Does my hon. Friend not see that there are serious risks in going down that route?

Sir Christopher Chope

No, I will not engage in trying to respond to all the scaremongering. My hon. Friend is good at the scaremongering. Let us recall the fact that our Prime Minister has said that no deal is better than a bad deal. The House of Commons has said that this is a bad deal, so why do we not have no deal and get on with it, thereby delivering for the people the result they wanted in the referendum? Certainly my constituents are looking eagerly towards the prospect of having no deal on 29 March.

Jamie Stone

rose—

Sir Christopher Chope

No, I am not going to give way anymore. At a sitting of the Exiting the European Union Committee, I asked the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), what would happen on the Irish border on 30 March. It was conceded that on that date there would not be any difference from the current arrangements. That is an example of the scaremongering that is going on about no deal.

I regret that the Government did not prepare more actively and further in advance for the no-deal option, but we must not let them benefit from their incompetence by saying that we do not think we are ready for no deal. We should be ready for no deal on 29 March. That is why we need to accelerate the preparations for it. If I asked my constituents whether they had confidence in the Government, their reply would be, "Not a lot, but a heck of lot more than in the Labour Opposition." They will have even more confidence in the Government if they are confident that the Government are not ruling out no deal and are stepping up preparations for no deal and if they can confirm unequivocally again that we will be leaving the single market and the customs union and that we will not have to have people coming into our country without any control over our borders.

14:56:00

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab)

It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), who just demonstrated why the Prime Minister's offer to reach out to every section of the House and every section of opinion on Brexit will not work. There is nothing that the Prime Minister could do, other than a hard Brexit, that the hon. Gentleman would accept. That encapsulates part of the problem that the Prime Minister has to deal with.

During the Prime Minister's statement to the House on Monday, I said that the statement she had made did not alter the real problems she had, which are: first, that she has no majority; secondly, that because she has no majority, she has no authority; and thirdly, that because she has no authority, her Government are effectively of no use to the country as a whole. I did not quite use those words, but that was what it amounted to.

I have listened carefully to the Prime Minister in the intervening periods, and she has offered nothing that anyone can work with. Had she been in the mode she was in following last night's vote two years or even 18 months ago, reaching out across the Chamber to different parties and different strands of opinion, it might have produced something different that would have been acceptable to the vast majority of people. Like many others, I voted for article 50 in the hope that we would come up with a Brexit that would meet the expectations and hopes of my constituents. The problem is that the Prime Minister's deal did not do that. That is why we are now in this position.

There has been a lot of comment about historical precedents in Parliament and how long it has been since a Government were defeated by such a margin. I decided in a conversation I had last night that I would look for other historical precedents that did not relate to Parliament, but to treaties, deals or bilateral agreements. I came across the treaty of Tordesillas of 1494. Even the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) would probably struggle with that one. It was a treaty, effectively, between Spain and Portugal that tried to carve up the rest of Europe and decide who got which colonies. And guess what? The rest of Europe did not agree with it, and it eventually became defunct and was never implemented. I think the Prime Minister's deal rather resembles that treaty.

The Prime Minister fought the last general election on the slogan that Britain needed a strong and stable Government. We have not had a strong and stable Government since the election, but, after last night's events, it certainly is not strong, and, given all the speculation about what is going to happen over the next few weeks, it certainly is not stable. That is why this motion of no confidence is timely and necessary.

I want to take issue with something the Prime Minister said in her speech. I am sure she meant it sincerely, but it does not represent the reality of life on the ground and in my constituency. Justifying why the Government wanted to go on, she said she was fighting against poverty and inequality. It simply is not true. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition went through a long list of problems with policy and the delivery of public services to demonstrate why that was not true, and I will not repeat those. In my constituency—

Mr Speaker

Order. I am extremely grateful to the right hon. Gentleman and I apologise for interrupting him. The Opposition are very considerably disadvantaged by the malfunction of the time-keeping facility. [Interruption.] Yes, I am well aware of that. [Interruption.] Order. There is no need for hon. Members to stand. It is very unsatisfactory. Unfortunately, as I said to the House—yesterday, I think—those who put it right cannot do so while the House is sitting, but it is disadvantageous. I can appeal to the Whips to try to keep Members informed, and in deference to the seniority of the right hon. Gentleman, and in the expectation that he is approaching his peroration, I will happily allow him a further sentence.

Mr Howarth

A further sentence?

Mr Speaker

I appreciate it is difficult, but Members do know the minute situation when they stand. They might not know the second situation, but they do know the minute situation.

Mr Howarth

Mr Speaker, you know I always try to satisfy the demands you place on me, and I will do so now.

The Prime Minister said the Government were fighting poverty and inequality. She might try telling that to the over 8,000 people in my constituency who had to resort to food banks last year. Some 3,000 of the parcels distributed were for children. Does that sound like a Government fighting poverty and inequality? I think not. The Government have run out of ideas and run out of time.

Mr Speaker

I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman's co-operation.

15:03:00

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con)

It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate.

I have full confidence in the Government and shall vote against the motion tonight. I have recently been surveying and canvassing in Axminster, Seaton, Tiverton, Cullompton and many of my other towns, and I am amazed at the true support for the Prime Minister out there on the street. It is quite amazing. They recognise that she has taken on an almost impossible job—to actually fulfil the

referendum result. There was a people's vote, and it took place in 2016. It was the largest vote in a generation, and there was a clear majority to leave the EU, and that is precisely what we must do.

Let us analyse this wonderful vote last night and how we got to this massive 230 majority. On one side, we have people on the Labour Benches who have not come clean about wanting to stop Brexit altogether. I must pay tribute to the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish nationalists. I disagree with them fundamentally, but the one thing they have done is come out in the open and say they are in favour of remaining in the EU. To those who want to deliver Brexit, however, I must say it is the Prime Minister who can do it.

On the one side, then, we had Opposition Members voting to thwart Brexit. On my own side, we had people who wanted to make sure it was the toughest Brexit ever. Those two lots of people have absolutely nothing in common.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab)
rose—

Neil Parish
I will give way in a minute.

When the Leader of the Opposition stood up at the end and said, “We now need to stay in the customs union”, immediately there were huge groans from my own side, because that is precisely what they did not want.

The Prime Minister has to get this deal through. I very much support the Democratic Unionists over the border in Northern Ireland. We must make sure that the whole of the UK is treated the same, and so there is work to be done, but would a hard Brexit help the Northern Ireland-Ireland situation? Would it help food processing and agriculture? It certainly would not, because of the huge potential tariffs and problems at the border. I know very well that on the island of Ireland there is a huge mix of processing, from the pigs in the north to the land in the south, and with the milk going all the way around the island of Ireland. Let us be sensible and have Brexit, not a people's vote. I give way to the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury).

Mike Amesbury
indicated dissent.

Neil Parish
The hon. Gentleman is okay, although he asked to intervene.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con)
Will my hon. Friend give way?

Neil Parish
I will.

Dame Cheryl Gillan
It is an honour to give my hon. Friend the opportunity to reflect on the next part of his speech by intervening on him. Does he agree, in the light of the parliamentary arithmetic last night and the vote today, that it would be infinitely better for this country to have the continued leadership of a Prime Minister who has the experience of negotiating so far, because it is only somebody with that

experience and knowledge of the detail who can reach out successfully across the House to find a solution to this intractable problem?

Neil Parish

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have a Prime Minister with the experience. We also have a Prime Minister who has stuck to her guns. In fact, she is hugely criticised for having done so. We have a Leader of the Opposition, however, who cannot work out if he is in favour of another referendum, who is not quite sure how he would vote if there was one, and who does not know, if there were to be a general election, whether the Labour party would take Britain out of the EU or keep it in. Is this a leader who could negotiate with the EU? Certainly not. It could never happen.

We need to deliver. When I talk to people in my constituency, as everyone across the House does, whatever their party, most say, “What on earth are you getting so worked up about?”, “Why haven’t you done it?” and, “For goodness’ sake, get on and do it!” Why is the Prime Minister wrong and the House right? I voted and campaigned to remain, but I accept the result of the referendum. This House is not representative in any shape or form of the opinion of the people of this country. People might have changed a little. We might have a second referendum, and the result might be 48% to leave and 52% to stay. What would that cure? Absolutely nothing. Let us have a third referendum or a fourth! We have had a referendum, and we need to deliver on that.

I disagree entirely with the Opposition on bringing forward this motion, but I also say, in all sincerity, to my own side: we are the party of government. We were elected to govern this country and so we have to make a decision. We cannot sit contemplating our navels forever instead of making a decision. The idea seems to be just to drive us and drive us in order to secure the hardest Brexit possible, and it will just about destroy British agriculture. I know that the Brexit Ministers and others are just waiting to pour cheap food into this country: they will want cheap food to be delivered under Brexit, and that will hugely affect our farmers.

For goodness’ sake, let us come together. Let us all, as a party, govern the country properly. Let us get a deal, and get out of the European Union.

15:10:00

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD)

We have adequate justification for this no-confidence motion in the form of the numbers yesterday night. However, I want to address not the numbers, which speak for themselves, but the arrogance that lies behind them. We are in this position because when the referendum was conducted and concluded, this was treated as entirely a matter for the Conservative party, and the 48%—now, naturally, a majority—who voted the other way were totally disregarded. Unfortunately, the Prime Minister’s response today featured the same arrogance and unwillingness to listen that has brought us to this point.

We have a very badly divided country, but we need to ask why it is divided. Who divided it? The people were promised—not by the Prime Minister herself, but by her colleagues who, for the most part, have departed from the responsibility of government—things that cannot now be delivered. There are a lot of very angry and frustrated people out there, and whether we have Brexit or no Brexit, whether we have a referendum or no referendum, they will remain very angry.

My view, which I think many colleagues share, is that the mature and British way of dealing with this is to go back and reason with those people, to put the Government’s case, and to accept the verdict that they are willing to pass on what the Government have negotiated, possibly with

variations. However, the no-confidence motion gives us another route, and, I think, a welcome one. We could have a general election that would help to resolve this issue. If the Leader of the Opposition were willing to say clearly, “I lead my party on the basis that we will have a people’s vote, and/or that Brexit will stop”, that would provide a clear dividing line which we could debate as a country, rather than engaging in a completely spurious debate about whether we should have a semi-permanent customs union or a permanent one.

My concern in respect of no confidence, however, is not simply about the handling of the Brexit negotiation. The simple truth is that the country has ground to a halt. Government is not functioning. As I have reminded the House, I was part of a Government that did work. It may have done unpopular things, but it worked. Decisions were made, and they are now not being made. Hundreds of civil servants have been taken away from the work that they should be doing to make Brexit preparations. Crises are simmering in the background in housing, the funding of local government, social care, the prisons and much else, and they are not being dealt with. The big mistakes that the Government have made on universal credit and the apprenticeship levy are not being rectified. No effective government is taking place.

However, the problem is not just that there is no government; we are seeing a horrendous waste of public money. I spent five years with my former colleague the present Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove)—who is sitting opposite me—scrimping to make savings of £1 million. The same people are now spending £4 billion on an exercise that has no purpose. Half the members of the Cabinet are saying publicly that no deal will not happen, and we will not use this money. It is a complete and utter waste. I spent five years in government, and I do not think that a single Minister was censured with a ministerial directive. Within the last few weeks, civil servants have started refusing to authorise Government spending because of the recklessness involved in it. We have had confirmation from the Department for Transport, and I believe that there are other cases.

We are seeing reckless financing, and we are seeing damage to the economy. When I left government, we had been through a very difficult time, but ours was the most rapidly growing country in the G7. It is now the slowest. Even the Government now acknowledge that Brexit, however it is done, will damage the economy. So what must happen now? I think that two things must happen.

First, we must have absolute clarity about stopping no deal. Half the Cabinet are going around telling businesses and others that it will not happen, and they are right to do so, but the Prime Minister herself must say that it is a ludicrous, damaging proposition. As for the glib idea that it would somehow be possible to have World Trade Organisation rules, I wrote an article yesterday in my favourite Liberal newspaper, The Daily Telegraph, explaining why it is so absolutely absurd.

No deal must be stopped, and we must then move on to the fundamental question of how we can secure the endorsement of the public for how we move forward.

15:15:00

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con)

I will support the Government today. This is absolutely no time for a self-serving general election called by the Labour party. What the British public now need the House to do is focus our efforts on finding a route to follow on Brexit.

The challenge of Brexit is not about whether it is Labour or Conservative; the challenge is precisely that Brexit is above party politics, and that is one of the principal reasons why the House has faced so many difficulties in trying to find a route on which people can coalesce. The British electorate have grown steadily more and more tired of some of the dysfunctional party politics that they see in our country, which too often prioritises short-term, press-release politics playing to its core base, irrespective of whether that reflects the position of the British public. Politicians should be able to work across parties if necessary to make the long-term decisions and deliver on the ground for the future generations of the British people.

I may have had my criticisms of my own Government and their strategy on Brexit. I think it was wrong to disenfranchise the 48%, and tactically inept then to disenfranchise the 52% by not delivering the Brexit for which they clearly felt that they were voting. However, all that we have seen from the Opposition is, as one of their own said yesterday, dither and delay. I think that many people, when they look back on this time in our history, will feel that both Front Benches failed to rise to the challenge of delivering Brexit and a route forward.

The reality that we must all understand is that party politics will not solve Brexit. Every single minute that we spend in the Chamber today debating whether or not we should have a party-political general election is a minute lost, when we could have been talking about what kind of consensus there is in the House for some sort of route forward on Brexit—and all the time the clock is ticking down. The big question that we must all ask, and answer, is “How do we, as a Parliament, chart a route?” What I would say to Ministers, and to the Prime Minister in particular, is that this is not her Brexit process. The process on Brexit belongs to all of us. It belongs to our communities, and we must now work together to find a path forward.

That has two clear implications. First, it is now imperative for the Prime Minister not just to talk to the House and to parties, but to listen to what MPs are saying. Secondly, however, she needs to go beyond that and allow the House to vote on the different and clear options that lie ahead, just as we were able to have a meaningful vote last night on her deal. That, ultimately, is how we find out whether there is a consensus on anything.

Many Members clearly feel that delivering on Brexit now means that, if necessary, we should depart with no deal. We should have a proper vote on that to test the will of the House. Others feel that a different version of a soft Brexit—they may call it Norway, Common Market or 2.0—is now the route on which we could find consensus. The House should be allowed to vote on that. Talks will not ultimately clarify the position, but they will risk wasting time that we simply do not have.

I believe that in the end, if it turns out that there is gridlock in this place and that, very much like the British public, we find it hard to coalesce on a single route for which we can vote, we have to go back to people and ask them—not through a party-political election that will not fundamentally deliver—the question to which we need an answer: which of these three routes forward do they want? Do they want the Prime Minister’s deal? The House might have got it wrong and the people want that deal, in which case they should be able to vote it through. Do they want a hard Brexit—getting on with it, leaving on WTO terms? If that is what they want, they should be able to have that. Or do they think the existing deal is the best one we have got? We do not know. This House will not find a route forward, and therefore we should have the confidence to allow the people their say.

15:20:00

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab)

I rise to support this motion of no confidence because at this critical time in our history I believe we have a Government who are incapable of governing, let alone doing so in the national interest. Never have I witnessed in all my 27 years in Parliament a Government as inadequate and incompetent as this one. I have never witnessed a Prime Minister so inept that she has squandered all personal authority and goodwill, yet like a broken record she continues to insist on her right to carry on regardless.

This is a Government becalmed in a sea of their own troubles and neglecting the country: presiding over increasing levels of poverty, homelessness and inequality, and ducking crucial reforms on social care, leaving millions relying on charity to eat. The deep splits in the Conservative party consume all of its energies and Brexit is like a black hole that devours all light, out of which literally nothing can emerge.

This is a Government who have failed badly even on their own terms. They have failed catastrophically on Brexit. They have failed to unite a country that their obsession with the EU divided in the first place. They have failed to deliver on the Prime Minister's personal promise to deal with "burning injustices", instead providing us with a parade of incompetent Ministers, unparalleled in any Administration since the second world war.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab)

My hon. Friend makes a telling point. While the Government dither over Brexit, meanwhile back home we face the range of issues she has just talked about: food banks, unemployment, and problems with the health service, education and so forth. One of the reasons why we want a general election is to deal with those things.

Ms Eagle

I agree with my hon. Friend. This Government are paralysed, dealing with their own obsessions, not with the real need and crucial policy issues in the country.

Yesterday's defeat on the draft withdrawal agreement was a catastrophic loss of the Prime Minister's own personal plan to engineer a hard Brexit in the UK, and it was entirely deserved. The Prime Minister has been humiliated by losing the vote on a plan she devised after little or no consultation with her own Cabinet. She finds herself in this position because of a series of colossal misjudgments which were entirely her own and for which she must now take personal responsibility.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab)

My hon. Friend is, as always, making an informed and detailed speech. Does she agree that it is only because of David Cameron's botched legacy of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 that the Government are able to ignore the will of this House? In any other circumstances, after losing on the figures of last night's vote, the Government would and should fall.

Ms Eagle

I entirely agree, and some of the imbalances caused by that Government in the way our unwritten constitution works need to be addressed.

The Prime Minister decided to kowtow to her own Brextremists rather than reach out. She tried to exclude Parliament from the process completely. She triggered article 50 without a plan and then called a general election which shattered her own majority—but of course she is doing her best to avoid a general election now.

The UK is now angrier, more divided and more fearful for the future than I have ever known it, and democracy itself is being questioned. Instead of trying to bring the country back together by reaching out, the Prime Minister has set herself up as the embodiment of leave voters, ignoring those who voted remain. Yesterday she even dangerously claimed that she is now the champion of “the people” against Parliament. She has failed to unite the country because her only interest is in uniting the Conservative party, and that has proved to be impossible.

This is a Government who do not seem to understand that demanding that people unite around their own partisan viewpoint can never heal divisions. They are not capable of reaching out, listening, compromising, and responding to genuine fears, and as such they are not fit for purpose.

On taking office, the Prime Minister promised to tackle “burning injustices” which made life difficult for those she called “just about managing.” She failed to acknowledge that much of the suffering in our country has been caused by the previous Governments in which she was a senior member. This Government refuse to acknowledge that years of cuts in public expenditure targeted most heavily on the poorest have resulted in much of the suffering and burning injustice she promised to end. The Government have issued countless press releases and have held a series of never-ending consultations on everything from social care, restaurant tips and rogue landlords to domestic violence, but nothing has changed.

Instead the country has been presented with a parade of incompetent Ministers who were simply not up to the job: a Home Secretary forced to resign over the Windrush scandal and the “hostile environment” which saw UK citizens treated like criminals and deported back to countries they had left as small children; and a Transport Secretary handing out shipping contracts to a company with no ships and no access to commercial ports, and who presides over the chaos of the railway timetable disasters and blames everyone but himself—a man who cannot even organise a fake lorry jam on the M20. There have also been three Brexit Secretaries in two years, each of them undermined by the Prime Minister, and then there is perhaps the Prime Minister’s crowning achievement: appointing the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) as Foreign Secretary—and she wonders why the UK is now a global laughing stock.

This Government are paralysed by their own obsessions. They have proved incapable of addressing a country crying out for change. It is time for them to go.

15:26:00

Mr Sam Gyimah (East Surrey) (Con)

My right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) hit the nail on the head when she said in her speech that, at a time of constitutional and political crisis in this country, every minute we spend on politics as usual and business as usual is a disaster for this country.

On the issue of Brexit, the Opposition have been completely absent from the field. It seems to me that the Leader of the Opposition has been gambling on chaos, believing that that will present him with the perfect opportunity to get into government and focus on his single-minded aim to introduce a Marxist “utopia” for this country. So on the issue of Brexit, Labour is not a Government-in-waiting; it is an Opposition in hiding.

Brexit is not the only issue, as the Opposition have said today, that we need to be debating. There are certain things that no Prime Minister of this country, irrespective of the political party they represent, should ever do. One of those things is to interfere with the territorial integrity of this

country. No Prime Minister has the right to do that. Another thing is that no Prime Minister should side with our enemies or be an enemy of our institutions.

Perhaps we are wondering what the Leader of the Opposition would be like as Prime Minister—and that is important, because anyone who votes for no confidence in the Government is suggesting that he should be the Prime Minister of this country. We need only look at what happened to Labour Members with a dissenting voice. They were threatened by a mob, yet the Leader of the Opposition pretends that that had nothing to do with him. Many of us on this side of the House disagree with the Prime Minister—I am one of them—and we say so in the TV studios every now and again, but at least we can have the confidence that we will never need police protection for disagreeing with her on a matter of principle. That is what has happened in the Opposition.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con)

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that the first duty of the state is to protect its citizens. Given the Leader of the Opposition's previous comments about not having an Army, and his position on Trident, let us imagine him running this country. Does my hon. Friend agree that our country's security would be completely destroyed?

Mr Gyimah

I will come on to security in a second.

It is not just Labour Members who feel threatened by the mob. Journalists have needed protection at the Labour party conference, and it was one of Labour's own MPs who called their party institutionally racist. Also, 40% of British Jews would consider leaving this country. Why? Because the Leader of the Opposition has spent a lifetime hanging around with the likes of Hamas and Hezbollah.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab)

Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Gyimah

I need to carry on.

No Prime Minister should be an enemy of our democracy or of our institutions. I was surprised to hear the shadow Justice Secretary say that we needed to ensure that our judiciary represented society. What could go wrong when politicians start trying to make our independent judiciary representative of our society?

The next point is security. During the 2017 general election, when I spoke to people on the doorstep and mentioned things like the IRA, some people said to me, "That was 30 years ago" or "I don't know the difference between the IRA and the IMF." Recently, however, we had a test case when Russian agents murdered an innocent person on British soil. In response, 147 Russian intelligence officers were expelled. Smaller countries such as Moldova, Estonia and Hungary also expelled Russian agents from their countries in support of us. To this day, we do not know whether the Leader of the Opposition supported that action. In fact, he said that we should send samples to the lead suspect in that murder case so that they could tell us whether or not they did it. That is very serious, because it sends a green light to every gangster that if this motion of no confidence goes through and the Leader of the Opposition becomes Prime Minister of our country, they will have a free pass. Putin and Assad will have a free pass—[Interruption.] Also, it suggests to the western alliance to which we are committed—[Interruption.] We are members of NATO—

Naz Shah

Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Speaker

Order. At the moment, the hon. Gentleman is not giving way.

Mr Gyimah

We are members of NATO, and we believe that an attack on one is an attack on all. We are committed to defending our allies. So what would happen if we had a Prime Minister who was not committed to NATO? The entire western alliance, and everything it is based on, would be completely undermined. I will vote with the Government today on the principle that there are certain things that no Prime Minister should ever do, and that we cannot trust the Leader of the Opposition not to do them. That is why we should all vote to support this Government.

15:32:00

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP)

Since yesterday evening, I have been struck by how many hon. Members have been assiduous in their entreaties that my hon. Friends and I should be present to speak in this debate and to vote in the Lobby in support of the Government in order to prevent a general election. Indeed, some of those entreaties have even come from the Government side of the House. [Laughter.] Never mind the people in the country not wanting a general election; in terms of indicative votes, I think if people here had a real choice and a secret ballot, there would be an overwhelming majority against a general election.

Be that as it may, we have arrived at this debate in the aftermath of the proposition of the Prime Minister—and it really was her proposition—on the withdrawal agreement being defeated by a record majority. Last night's verdict was emphatic, and it requires lessons to be learned if the Prime Minister is to secure meaningful changes to the withdrawal agreement. I trust that those lessons will be learned. Our view has been entirely consistent, in that we want a deal with the European Union in order to achieve an orderly exit from the European Union in March, but the backstop has been fatal to the proposed withdrawal agreement. That needs to be dealt with.

Following the general election, we entered into the confidence and supply agreement with the Conservative party, in the national interest, to pursue the agreed objectives as set out in that agreement. The support that we have secured for Northern Ireland in relation to the extra investment for the health service, education and infrastructure—regardless of constituency and regardless of political affiliation—has been widely welcomed by all fair-minded people in the Province.

On Brexit, we agreed to support the Government where they acted on the basis of our “shared priorities”—that is what the confidence and supply agreement states in terms. For us, one of our shared priorities, of course, is the preservation of the integrity of the United Kingdom and ensuring that we leave the European Union as one country, not leaving part of it behind under single market regulation while the rest is not subject to such rules made in Brussels. So we supported the Prime Minister when she said that she would secure a deal that would deliver on the verdict of the referendum—take back control of our money, our laws and our borders—and ensure that we left as one United Kingdom. We have delivered on our side of that agreement, ensuring that the Government have had the necessary supply, and ensuring a majority for the Government on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and other important legislation.

But on the issue of the Brexit backstop, as this House well knows, we do have a big difference with the Prime Minister, and so do the majority of Conservative Members who are not on the Government payroll, who oppose the Prime Minister's deal as well. It is because the draft withdrawal agreement breaches the shared priorities for Brexit we signed up to that we have not been prepared to support it.

Now we have this no-confidence motion before us. We believe it is in the national interest to support the Government at this time so that the aims and objectives of the confidence and supply agreement we entered into can be achieved. Much work remains to be done on those matters.

As I said, I do not think that people in this country would rejoice tonight at the prospect of a general election were it to be called. I am not convinced that a general election would significantly change the composition of the House—and of course it would not change, whatever the outcome, the choices that lie before us all. The timing of this motion, as we well know, has got much more to do with the internal dynamics of the Labour party than a genuine presentation of an alternative programme for government.

We will support the Government on this motion this evening so that the Prime Minister has more time and has the space to focus now on acting in the national interest on Brexit. It is important that the Prime Minister now does listen and does deliver the Brexit that ensures that the whole of the United Kingdom leaves the European Union together.

15:37:00

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con)

It is a privilege to follow the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds).

We gather this afternoon to debate the Leader of the Opposition's motion that he should be Prime Minister. That, I think, will unite the Conservative party more than any other motion, and indeed unite the nation—long overdue after the divisions of Brexit.

If you will forgive me, Mr Speaker, I want to ask, channelling my inner "Monty Python", "What have the Conservatives ever done for us?" Let us ask, "What has this great party ever done for us?" [Interruption.] Hon. Members are right: our record may not pass scrutiny when one thinks about the mess we inherited from the Opposition. We have stabilised the public finances, cut the Labour deficit by 80%, led a jobs-led recovery, creating over 1 million jobs; we inherited unemployment of 2.5 million—[Interruption.] The Opposition are barracking because they do not like to hear it, or hear it broadcast to the nation, but the nation should hear it. We have created over 1 million jobs in an extraordinary jobs-led recovery applauded by the International Monetary Fund.

Naz Shah

rose—

George Freeman

I will give way when I have finished this point.

We have introduced a national living minimum wage, helping over 2.4 million workers. One would think that Opposition Members would cheer that, but no—they are not cheering because they want this election for a different reason. I will continue the list. We have introduced over 3 million apprenticeships, giving a whole generation of non-academic youngsters access to the workplace. We have introduced welfare reforms. While I do not think that we have got those totally right, the

Opposition have taken every opportunity not to introduce sensible and positive reforms and work with us, but to vote against every single welfare reform on principle, flying in the face of the public's wish for a welfare system that is there for those who need it but is not taken advantage of. Not only that, but we have introduced tax cuts for the lowest paid—not the highest paid, on whose earnings we rely to fund public services, but the lowest paid. Some 32 million of our lowest-paid workers have benefited from Conservative and Liberal Democrat-led tax cuts under the coalition Government.

I have not finished, Mr Speaker, because not only have we put in the money to the NHS that Labour promised at the last election, but we have put in more. With £20 billion of funding, the NHS is always safe under Conservative leadership. We have introduced a massive commitment on mental health, for which I pay personal tribute to the Prime Minister. This party, not the Opposition, made it clear that parity between mental and physical health must be achieved.

We have introduced a pioneering industrial strategy that has been welcomed by Peter Mandelson—once a distinguished member of the Labour party's Front Bench—and I am proud to have played my part in it. We have also committed to spend 2% of GDP on defence and have launched two new aircraft carriers and a new fleet of fighters. That is not enough, but defence is safe in this country. Even on housing, where we have not achieved all that we should, we have built 1.3 million homes, 400,000 of which are affordable—more than the Labour party, which is complaining now, ever did in its 13 years in power. We have also led a renaissance in education, with over 1.9 million children now in schools judged by Ofsted as good or outstanding—1.9 million more than under Labour. Labour wants a vote of no confidence in this Government, but that is a record of which no one should be ashamed.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con)

My hon. Friend is making a good case for why this should be a vote of no confidence in Her Majesty's occasionally loyal Opposition, but does he agree that it should also be a vote of no confidence in the EU's negotiators, who have continually failed to provide the legally binding annexe on the backstop that would make all the difference to the deal?

George Freeman

My hon. Friend is probably right, but I do not want to be distracted from focusing on the issue at hand.

Meanwhile, the Leader of the Opposition—our putative future Prime Minister—has broken promise after promise. On tuition fees, he promised a younger generation that he was going to reverse them and then reversed the promise. On debt, he wants £1,000 billion extra in borrowing and spending, taking us right back to square one after we tidied up the mess that we inherited. Mayor Khan has presided over a knife-crime epidemic in London. He talks about it but does not deal with it. The shadow Home Secretary, Diane Abbott, cannot add up, let alone defend the police when they try to clamp down on crime. The truth is that the Labour Front-Bench team are exploiting the Brexit divisions—[Interruption.] I hear the heckling from Labour Members. They do not like what I am saying, but they are going to have to hear it if they want a vote of no confidence. I will not dwell on the appalling unleashing of bigotry and intolerance on the Labour Front Bench that has turned a once-great party into a disgrace.

On Brexit, the truth is that Jeremy Corbyn, the Leader of the Opposition, is the Scarlet Pimpernel of Brexit. In the north, they seek him here, the champion of Brexit for the northern Labour seats. In the south, they seek him there, the champion of remain. [Interruption.] The truth is that the Labour

Front-Bench team, who are heckling me now, have more positions on Brexit than the “Kama Sutra”. Will the real Jeremy Corbyn please stand up? In the pantomime politics—

Mr Speaker

Order. This tendency of Members on both sides of the House to refer to other Members by name is quite wrong. Stop it.

George Freeman

Will the real right hon. Member for Islington North please stand up? To channel my inner Leader of the Opposition, I was speaking this morning to Mark from Castleford on talkRADIO, who said to me that we do not need an election, because we do not have an Opposition, that Labour do not have a policy, so there is no choice, and that we need Parliament to get on and implement Brexit.

In contrast to the cowardice of the Labour Front-Bench team, I want to highlight the bravery of many Labour Back Benchers, particularly the Members who had the guts last night to stand up for their constituents and vote for a moderate, sensible Brexit. The hon. Members for Dudley North (Ian Austin) and for Bassetlaw (John Mann) and the right hon. Members for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) and for Birkenhead (Frank Field), along with the hon. Members for North Down (Lady Hermon) and for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd), knew that if we break our promise to the British people, this place’s credibility will be damaged.

Parliament must sort the situation out. I welcome the Prime Minister’s conversion to cross-party discussions, and I hope that the real right hon. Member for Islington North enters the room.

15:44:00

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab)

I rise to support the motion not simply because the Government have made a mess of Brexit, although they have, but because of the damage that they have inflicted on people in constituencies such as mine and to the fabric of our society. Both those things are linked in the character of the Prime Minister, who is so narrow in outlook that she could not reach out across this House to get a Brexit deal that we could all support. Instead, she chose to draw red lines to appease the extremists on her own Back Benches. She talks of the national interest but, in fact, she acts in her own interest of retaining power. Just as she cannot see further than that, she is unable to appreciate the circumstances in which many of our fellow citizens live.

There are people in constituencies such as mine who go out to work every day of their life and are still having to go to food banks to feed their children, because they earn so little or because they are on zero-hours contracts. We see others, too, every week in our surgeries. Elderly people who have worked all their life cannot get the social care they deserve in their old age. A lady came to see me recently who cares for a sick husband, who has now taken on the care of her two grandchildren, both incredibly damaged in their early lives, and who is now denied the adaptations she needs for her home as there is no money left because local government funding has been cut so much. Another lady I have seen is a victim of domestic violence, and she has been asked to take on her two children because it was feared that her former partner was now abusing them. She did, but she is now trapped in a one-bedroom flat because of the scarcity of affordable social housing.

These are not the shirkers and the shysters of Tory imagination; these are people who are doing the right thing and going out to work every day to earn their poverty. That has come about not by incompetence—I could probably forgive the Government for being incompetent—but as a result of the deliberate policy of cutting back the services on which so many people in our society depend.

The Government boast of spending record amounts on schools, but that is because there are more pupils. In fact, they have cut spending on pupils by 8%, and by 25% in sixth forms. And who suffers? Those who depend on state education.

Who suffers from the lack of affordable housing? Children who are trapped in unsuitable accommodation and who can neither study to improve their prospects nor even grow up healthy. The Government accuse the Labour party of putting a burden on people's future, but the burden is due to what the Government are causing now—the lack of opportunities. There is a lack of opportunity to get a decent education, to grow up properly and to make the best of life. That is due to the Government's constant attack on public services.

The Government loaded nurses with the burden of debt when they abolished bursaries. They chose to wage war on junior doctors. They sacked thousands of police officers, prison officers and police community support officers. This was a deliberate policy, and it is not just individuals whom the Government target but whole regions of this country.

Only a Government who do not care about the north could wash their hands of the chaos that is Northern rail. Only a Government who do not care about the north could maintain a system of local government finance that imposes the biggest cuts on the poorest local authorities, mostly in the north. Then they tell them to raise the precepts without knowing that in the north-west 42% of properties are in band A and in Surrey 75% of properties are in band D or above. Local authorities in the north cannot raise the same amount of money on the same rise in council tax. Spending has been totally divorced from need.

I have no confidence in this Government not just because they are incompetent but because they have no confidence and no faith in the people of this country.

Mr Speaker

Order. Before I call the hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant), who has been advised that she will be the first to be subject to a four-minute limit, I have first to announce the results of the deferred Divisions.

On the question relating to energy conservation, the Ayes were 330 and the Noes were 240. Of those Members representing constituencies in England and Wales, the Ayes were 302 and the Noes were 233, so the Ayes have it.

On the question relating to UK participation in the EU Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation, the Ayes were 577 and the Noes were 20, so the Ayes have it.

[The Division lists are published at the end of today's debates.]

15:49:00

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con)

I am very confident that a great future awaits the UK after we have left the EU. We are the fifth largest economy; our judicial system is revered the world over; our time zone allows us to trade with Asia in the morning and the Americas in the afternoon; we have the greatest diplomatic service in the world; and, crucially, nations across the globe want to do business with us, thanks to many of the achievements of this Government since 2010.

In order to seize those opportunities as we leave the EU, this House and our country need to come together. That will require determination, effort, spirit and compromise—from us all. We need to treat each other with more respect and work harder to understand the different points of view.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)

I will be supporting this no-confidence motion for a number of reasons. I could go into any of those, be it universal credit or any other area. One key reason why the Prime Minister has let our constituents down is that this was her plan for Brexit, with her red lines, and she has failed to get it through. Does the hon. Lady not believe that the Prime Minister has to take some responsibility, accept some blame and stop blaming everybody else?

Mrs Grant

That point has been covered on a multitude of occasions, today and in previous debates. I am not going to eat into my time by addressing it, because I have some important and different points to make.

A well-known expression is, “If you’re shouting, you’re losing.” At the moment, many of us, on both sides of this House, seem to be shouting. Like many colleagues, I have witnessed, on a daily basis, taunts and lurid language as I have gone about my business near the parliamentary estate. Sadly, this has been with an ever-present apprehension of a brick being lobbed or someone being punched. As a former domestic violence lawyer, I know too well that when tensions reach fever pitch, as they are right now, it is so easy for a situation that starts with some shouting and jeering to escalate into physical abuse and worse. All of this needs to stop.

It is our duty and responsibility, as parliamentarians, to find a solution that ends this Brexit deadlock and delivers for the British people. They need that and deserve it. The answer is not a vote of no confidence in this Government. No one could have worked harder and more patriotically than our Prime Minister to deliver this Brexit. The answer is not a second referendum, with all that division and uncertainty. The answer is certainly not a general election. We were also recently elected and re-elected in 2017. Our job is to take difficult decisions and find answers. That is what we are here to do. Our constituents rightly expect us to deliver. It is for this House to find a solution that works. We must come together. We must stop playing party political games, be willing to compromise, and put the interests of our constituents and country first. I will be supporting the Government today.

15:53:00

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab)

I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition has tabled and secured this motion. I shall of course be voting for it and I hope it wins, because my constituents and the country desperately need a Labour Government. I was proud and privileged to serve in the last Labour Government, and I know what a transformative power for the better a Labour Government can be. We also desperately need a Labour Government to steer this country through and out of the current Brexit crisis. So I hope we win tonight’s vote and get a chance to change the Government, but we need to be honest with ourselves and the public. If we do secure and win an election, we will still be facing the worst crisis in our peacetime history, because of the mess the Tories have made of Brexit.

A general election in the current circumstances would, whether we like it or not, be a Brexit election. We would need to be absolutely clear about what our position was and what we would do in government. I have heard some suggestions that we should promise to deliver a better Brexit; given the overwhelming views of Labour members and voters, I am not convinced that that would

be a winning strategy. I would hope that we would listen to our members and voters, and to the country, which is tiring of this Brexit shambles, and either campaign on a policy of staying in Europe or, failing that, promise to try to renegotiate a better deal before putting that back to the people in another referendum.

Let us be frank, though: the likelihood is that we will not win tonight's confidence vote. In those circumstances, it is vital that we all put the national interest first and find some way out of the current crisis. More no-confidence motions, which some have suggested, are not the answer, and the Shadow Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), was right absolutely to rule that option out on the radio this morning. There is no time for any more can-kicking at this moment of national crisis. We need decisions and we need leadership.

The Government—if they are still the Government after tonight's vote—have the main responsibility here. They do not seem to have learned anything from last night's catastrophic defeat. They are still sticking to their red lines and still failing to reach out to the official Opposition. It is absolutely extraordinary that after the Prime Minister's assurances last night she has not bothered to pick up the phone to the Leader of the Opposition. It is a disgrace. The Leader of the House also indulged in yet more fiction this morning when she claimed on the radio that the Opposition did not have a policy. We do. She might not like it, but we do, and if the Government are serious, they need to talk to the Opposition about it.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)

The right hon. Gentleman absolutely hits the nail on the head in respect of the Prime Minister. In her response to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) at Prime Minister's questions today, she could not even think of a compromise on her red lines. That shows that she really is not in the right mode; she is still in the mode she was in yesterday afternoon, before she was thumped in last night's vote.

Mr Bradshaw

The Prime Minister is in a total state of denial. We are not going to get anywhere unless that changes.

I am extremely doubtful that we have the time or the votes in this House for a renegotiation of the withdrawal agreement along Norway lines, or for any other Brexit alternative, but if people think we do, let us put that to the test in votes next week. If, when all the other options are tested, none can command a majority and Parliament remains gridlocked, the only option left will be to give the decision back to the people, as the Shadow Chancellor also said on the radio this morning.

Mr Seely

Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Bradshaw

No, I am not giving way.

Giving the decision back to the people also has the advantage of being official Labour party policy, agreed unanimously at our conference. There would be bewilderment and dismay among Labour Members, voters and the wider public, who are looking to us for leadership, if, at this critical time, we failed to provide it.

Let me say one final thing to those in my own party who still fear or oppose another referendum: a public vote to get out of this Brexit mess is also the surest-fire way to secure the general election

that we on the Opposition Benches desire, because when the public reject the Government's botched Brexit deal, as they will, no Government dependent on the votes of the hard-line Brexiteers and the DUP will survive.

15:57:00

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con)

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak in this debate.

Yesterday was clearly a tough day—a tough day for the Prime Minister and for Government Members—but today is not. By calling a vote of no confidence and looking for a general election, the Leader of the Opposition has proved that his view is what I have always considered it to be: that politics is just a game, and that all that matters is this posturing and the endless clipping of TV clips of him shouting at the Prime Minister. The reality is that people just want to get on with Brexit and get it done. There is no appetite for a general election. There is a huge challenge now. If people continue to think that Brexit is a Conservative problem—that only the Conservatives can deal with Brexit—they fundamentally misunderstand why people voted to leave the European Union. A challenge has been presented to the political class that we must find a way to answer, but to which absolutely no answers are coming from the Leader of the Opposition.

Neil Gray

The hon. Gentleman talks about politics being a game, but all this is more about self-interest. Eighteen months ago, calling a general election was apparently in the national interest, but Government Members now have no interest at all. Why is that?

Johnny Mercer

The hon. Gentleman knows my views on a lot of what has gone on, including on the calling of that general election, but this is about today—this is a different moment. We are 18 months down the line. Let us be honest about what would happen in a general election. We would not have the normal election between centre left and centre right parties. The Opposition Front Bench team advocates a hard-left programme that has singularly destroyed almost every single country in which it has been practised. It uses what can only be described as sincerely held dishonesty to claim that it will look after some of the most impoverished people in this country, when in fact it is those impoverished people who will pay the biggest price from a Government who are represented by Labour Members.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con)

Does my hon. Friend agree that there is no social mobility in bankruptcy and that it is only if we have a prosperous economy that is generating opportunity that we can deliver that kind of social mobility?

Johnny Mercer

My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. It is rank hypocrisy that comes out of Opposition Members when they talk about social justice and equalising life chances—that fantastic phenomenon that, no matter where a person is born in this country, whether it be Manchester, Plymouth, London or Chelsea, and no matter whether they are gay, black, white or whatever, the circumstances of their birth are irrelevant because their opportunities are the same. That fundamental principle is in no way advanced whatsoever by the hard-left policies of massive government, massive tax, the taking over of private companies and the sucking out of money from the pockets of people who go out and work hard in this country every single day.

David Morris

Does my hon. Friend agree that every Labour Government in history have left the country in bankruptcy?

Johnny Mercer

I totally agree with my hon. Friend. We have just had to sit through a bizarre rant from a Member of the Opposition, who is now no longer in their place, who has this idea that people like me turn up in this place to impoverish people in the north and the south-west of this country. It is a repulsive suggestion that plays to the fantasy within which most Opposition Members live. It is a complete and utter load of rubbish.

Naz Shah

rose—

Johnny Mercer

I will not give way again; I have given away enough already.

I really think that we should stick to the facts. The Prime Minister mentioned that there were 1 million fewer people in absolute poverty, 300,000 fewer children in absolute poverty, and 2 million children in this country going to good or outstanding schools. These policies have genuinely affected the lowest paid in this country whom Opposition Members pretend to care about. If we look at income tax thresholds, those people are now keeping more of their money than they have ever kept before and the minimum wage has consistently gone up as a result of our policies.

I do not want to get on to the welfare state today, but it is one issue that made me join the Conservative party. I come from a fairly agnostic political space, which, I am afraid, is where the majority of this country comes from. Members may think that everybody is fascinated with politics, but I can assure them that they are not. The majority are agnostic. We had a welfare state that sapped the ambition from millions and millions of young people in this country by making them better off when they were out of work and on benefits than when they were in work. At least we on the Conservative Benches had the courage to try to correct that injustice in this country. That simply will not happen under Labour, which has been bribing people for votes for as long as I can remember.

Hon. Members

Shame!

Johnny Mercer

Believe me, I feel no shame. [Interruption.] Opposition Members can shout at me as much as they want, but I feel no shame when they call that out.

We must do better though; everybody gets that. We must work together better and come together under one banner. We need a different approach. Nobody should misunderstand that. I say to the Prime Minister that she cannot keep doing the same thing and expect different results. She must change course, and we must meet the challenge. Politics are changing. We can ride on the front of that wave, crafting something that we can work with, producing policies that then change the lives of those people whom we come to work for, or we can laugh and sneer at it and be changed by events. We must change with politics. It is an exciting time. We should see Brexit for the opportunity that it is, not the hospital pass that some would make us think it is. It is an opportunity. Let us seize that opportunity and change the country.

16:04:00

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab)

I am grateful for the chance to speak in this debate.

The essence of our argument was laid out with force, passion and eloquence by the Leader of the Opposition. The Prime Minister is this afternoon charged with the greatest political failure in modern times. On the most important question that this country faces, she has secured the biggest defeat that Parliament has ever delivered. That alone should be grounds for her to go. How on earth does she think she is going to command a majority in this House when she cannot command a majority on the biggest question of the day?

The truth is—the Leader of the Opposition made this point eloquently earlier—that the Prime Minister’s failure of leadership stretches well beyond the failure of her policy on Brexit. It is often said that we campaign in poetry but we govern in prose. For me, the best definition of our poetry was set out back in 1945, when we offered that plan to reconstruct a war-weary nation and win the peace.

At that time we said, “What we need in this country is industry in service of the nation.” Do we have that today? The Chancellor himself is the first to berate the terrible rates of productivity growth in our industry, which are worse today than they were in the late 1970s when we used to call it “British disease”.

We said that everyone in this country should have the right, through the sweat of their brow, to earn a decent life. Yet half the people in work in the west midlands are in poverty. There are now people going to food banks who never thought they would be in this position.

Above all, we said to the people of this country that they should be able to live and raise a family free from fear of want. Well, on the doorstep of this Parliament people are dying homeless, including one of the 5,000 people who have died homeless over the last five years. Many people in this House know that I recently lost my father to a lifelong struggle with alcohol after he lost the woman he loved to cancer, a few years older than me. I know at first hand how a twist of fate can knock you down, but for millions of people in this country, a twist of fate knocks them on to the streets, on to the pavements and into the soup kitchens where I work in Birmingham on a Sunday night. That is not the sign of a civilised and decent country, and it is something of which this Government should be ashamed.

When the Prime Minister took her seals of office, she had the temerity to stand on the steps of Downing Street and say to an anxious nation that she was going to tackle the burning injustices of this country. She said that she was going to tackle the burning flames, yet those flames now rage higher than I have ever seen in my lifetime. She now leads a Government of shreds and patches, and the Opposition say that this country deserves better and that she should do the decent thing and resign.

16:07:00

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con)

It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne). I do not agree with his conclusion in any sense because I think it would be grossly wrong for us to have a general election, but I do agree with him when he talks about some of the very real problems that exist in our country and that we have an absolute duty, as a Government, to start to address

properly, ruthlessly in many respects and thoroughly. I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is already beginning that work. She is already looking at universal credit to ensure that we are delivering a system that is absolutely fair—not just for the taxpayer, but for the person who comes to rely on universal credit.

I also agree with the right hon. Gentleman that it cannot be right that we live in a country where people in work are relying on food banks. That is wrong. That is not the sort of country that we should have in 2019. Equally, we have a system whereby people in need are given food vouchers and not often cash, which they also might need. Again, that cannot be right, but it is good and right that changes are beginning to be made.

There is another problem. The Government are undoubtedly set on the right course, but they are often being diverted because of Brexit, which has swamped almost everything that we want to do and that I know we can do. There is a real democratic deficit opening up in our country. I agree with what my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) said about the state of British politics and the extremism that is undoubtedly taking over. Anybody who tries to suggest that the Labour party has not been taken over by the far left is frankly living in fantasy land. Anybody who has any doubt about that only needs to look at the comments made on social media by Momentum and all the rest of it. The whole tone of British politics has been grossly diminished.

We all know—let us be honest—that many Members sitting on the Labour Back Benches are in fear of being deselected and fear the far left all the time. More importantly, this country should fear the far left, who have taken over the Front Bench of the Labour party. Goodness help us if they ever get into government, because they would undoubtedly cause the most appalling damage, especially to our economy.

Angus Brendan MacNeil
Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Anna Soubry
Of course I will take the extra minute.

Angus Brendan MacNeil
The right hon. Lady talked at the beginning of her speech about fairness. I would suggest that the problem is not so much fairness as resources. There are plenty of resources in this country; it is the distribution of resources that is the problem. That is why the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) is in the soup kitchens of Birmingham on a Sunday night—because of the inadequate fairness of distribution of resources in the UK. That is why people reached to Brexit. That is why people are looking to weird places in the far left.

Anna Soubry
I do not agree with that analysis at all. The problem is that if we do not get the economy of our country sorted out and we do not have a strong economy, we do not have the money to pay for the services that we need. We know that we need to tackle the greater problems, such as the fact that there is almost a crisis in social care, but there are no magic money trees. The great danger—I would say this, given my views on Brexit—is if we do not get Brexit right, and we know what the consequences of Brexit will be, whichever way we cut it, because the Treasury analysis has told us: it will make our country's fortunes less prosperous, and it will not be good for the economy of this country.

I want to return to the problem about democracy, because I am concerned. Everybody has almost given up on the Labour party, but my party also has to get it right. The Prime Minister has done her best; I do not doubt that for one moment. However, she had many opportunities—Members on both sides of the House have talked about this, and I did earlier today—at the outset to reach out, especially to the 48%, and ensure that she formed a consensus at the beginning, working across the parties.

There was undoubtedly a time when we could have got a consensus and a majority in this place, but unfortunately the Prime Minister pandered to a part of my party that has been there for a very long time, banging on about Europe. In my opinion, they do not represent the moderate, one nation, pragmatic Conservative party that I joined. Unfortunately she has pandered to that side of my party, with great harm to our party, because if we ever lose that centrist, sensible, moderate, pragmatic, one nation conservatism, we will not succeed in winning again, especially among young people. I hope the Prime Minister changes her tone. The problem is her deal. If she wants to get Brexit sorted and deliver it, she has to change her deal, rub out her red lines and work with everybody.

16:13:00

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab)

I think it is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), although I completely disagree with the lines she peddled about my party.

We all came to this place knowing that each of us has been given a mandate to represent the communities that elected us. No one party won the general election in 2017, but the Prime Minister was clearly able to command a functioning majority in the House of Commons, and we have all had to acknowledge that reality. I did not expect much from a Prime Minister who had promised a dementia tax, more grammar schools and an end to the ban on foxhunting, but I did have some hope that there were at least one or two policy areas where we might be able to park our party politics and begin to address the issues that matter most to the communities we represent.

For example, I know there are Conservative Members who share my concerns about funding for our schools. The Prime Minister included funding for our schools as a priority in her foreword to the Conservative party manifesto in 2017, which also committed to a real-terms increase in funding for our schools. Yet this Government have replaced one unfair schools funding formula with another, leaving schools in Crewe and Nantwich among the lowest-funded in the country. Cuts have meant that headteachers are using the pupil premium to keep their budgets afloat and parents are being asked by cash-strapped schools to pay for teaching resources.

I welcomed the commitment to tackle unfair executive pay and, to quote the Prime Minister, to build a

“Britain in which work pays”.

Yet while CEOs have managed to scoop themselves an average 11% hike in their pay this year, ordinary working people’s real wages remain lower than where they were in 2010, and millions of working families are set to be worse off under the Government’s deeply flawed universal credit system.

During the 2017 election, I was pleased to hear the Prime Minister promise to fix what she admitted was a broken care system and to bring forward a social care Green Paper. In July of that year, the Government said that

“we cannot wait any longer—we need to get on with this”.—[Official Report, House of Lords, 6 July 2017; Vol. 783, c. 987.]

By the time we got to November, they told us that it would be here by the following summer. By the time we got to the summer, they told us to expect it in the autumn, and then, before the end of the year. We are a long way from 2017, when it was first promised, and there is still no sign of a Green Paper. In the meantime, care providers in Crewe and Nantwich have been placed in special measures, care workers have been all but ignored and the elderly and most vulnerable in our communities have been neglected by this Government, while they have pulled themselves apart over Brexit.

This Government have not just failed people in the way they have handled the Brexit negotiations. They have failed on the economy; they have failed on our public services; and they have been riding roughshod over Parliament, repeatedly ignoring the expressed view of this House. I am sure there are Conservative Members who will be deeply disappointed with this Government’s record. They get the casework and they see what effect this Government’s policies have on their constituents, and they should not vote against this motion out of self-preservation.

This is not simply about the Government pursuing policies that I disagree with or failing to meet my expectations; this is about a Government who are not even coming close to delivering on their own promises. What is more, we have seen more than once that the Prime Minister cannot command a majority in the House, and we have got to break this Brexit deadlock. This Government have failed our communities and left a trail of broken promises in their wake. I think it is time we gave those we represent a chance to turn their back on these failed policies, just as this Government have turned their back on their future.

16:17:00

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con)

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith). I rise to make a short contribution simply to state that I have full confidence in this Conservative and Unionist Government.

I also have full confidence in my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. She personifies duty. She is a patriot, and a servant of our country and its people. She is a woman of integrity. She continues to serve the national interest with all diligence and is leading a Government who are dedicated to serving our national interest. We should be under no illusions. She was given the toughest job ever handed to a peacetime Prime Minister: she has been asked to circle an impossible square. However, I have every confidence that, under her leadership, we will honour the instruction of the British people and leave the European Union in an orderly and managed way.

We must not lose sight of the real achievements of the past nine years of Conservative-led Government. The mess that Labour Members left—they always leave a mess behind them—is being cleared up. The deficit is down by four fifths. The public finances are being restored. The hard work of the British people is paying off. One thousand new jobs have been created every single day of this Government. Employment is at record levels and unemployment at a record low, and there is real growth in household earnings. We are delivering on our promise to make the United Kingdom the best country in the world in which to set up and scale up a business. We have the right approach.

Naz Shah

Will the hon. Gentleman confirm—it escapes me—whether the Conservative party manifesto also said, “We will increase food banks, increase child poverty and cut education funding in real terms”?

Stephen Kerr

Absolutely not. We have the right approach to industrial strategy, the right approach to clean energy strategy and the right approach to new and evolving technologies. This Government are tackling the grand challenges of our times. We are on the side of our people and our planet. We are rolling out the most important reform of welfare services ever undertaken, we are investing in our NHS for the future and we are resolved never to compromise on the defence of the realm against the background of an evolving threat to our freedom. We have a proud record of delivering practical help to the poorest people on the planet. In my constituency, this Government have delivered on a £90 million city deal, providing a bright economic future for everyone in our city and district.

Beyond that, we have a Prime Minister who believes in the Union. That is core to who I am and what I stand for. Her belief is heartfelt. Other people may have the words, but she has the conviction, and her Government are committed to strengthening the Union. I remind colleagues—we must never forget this—that the nationalists and socialists on the Opposition Benches are waiting in the wings, and we have a duty to our country never to allow them anywhere near the seat of government.

16:21:00

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab)

I wish the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) were still in his place, because we would have the kind of clash of opinion we want in this House. He suggests that when Opposition Members talk about child poverty, say it is an absolute horror to walk past homeless people on the street as we walk into Parliament and point out that this Government drive people to food banks as public policy—the Government see food banks not as charities run by good people as volunteers but as a matter of public policy—they advocate a hard-left programme. I will tell him something: if that is a hard-left programme, I will stand on it in my constituency and across the country. We are not frightened of saying that, we are not frightened of saying we believe this country deserves better and we are not frightened of saying we can do better.

I want to come on to Brexit, but let me first say this. I accept that Government Members are not uncaring about homelessness—I would not suggest that for one moment—but it is an indictment of the Government that school pupils cannot get the special needs support they want and that people in hospitals cannot get the care they want. Those things do not land from the moon. They do not just happen. They are a consequence of the policies people in this House voted for.

Alex Chalk

rose—

Mr Seely

rose—

Vernon Coaker

I will not give way, because loads of people want to speak and I want to be fair to them.

It is only because of those policies that those things happen. People across the country realise that. I will stand on what my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition says is important for this

country—I am perfectly happy to do that—but I will also list the voting record of every single Conservative Member and tell the people of this country what they voted for. We see the consequences of those policies every single day.

Let me just say this with respect to the Prime Minister. We are debating a motion of no confidence, which is not likely to be passed. It is a constitutional and political dilemma for this country that we as a House are going to say we have confidence in a Prime Minister we have no confidence in. This is a complete and utter constitutional fiasco. The majority yesterday was 230, yet the Prime Minister clings on. She says she is the person to deliver a Brexit. I think there is a parliamentary majority for a sensible way forward, but we do not have a Prime Minister who can deliver that parliamentary majority. That is the problem she has: she is in hock to a part of her party that prevents her from building consensus across Parliament.

I wonder what the result of the vote tonight would be if the motion before us was one of no confidence in the Prime Minister's ability to deliver the Brexit this country needs or to take this country forward. For many, such a motion, rather than one of general no confidence in the Government, would pose a real dilemma. The Prime Minister needs to reach out. She needs to build consensus, starting with the Labour Front Bench and other parties in Parliament. In that way, she might be able to bring the country together and take us forward in a united way.

16:25:00

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con)

I am a former soldier. During my military career, we were given an aim and an execution to carry out that aim. The Government were given an aim by the people of this country—to leave the EU. The execution of that aim has, sadly, gone wrong for many reasons. I will not stand here today and overly criticise my Government, although I will make one point. I wish some Members on the Treasury Bench would stop accusing the likes of me of perhaps ruining Brexit. That is not my aim. I voted against the Government last night because the deal is not in the national interest and would not deliver Brexit. It would keep us half in, half out, with no one in the room to stand up for our country. There were many other reasons, including the backstop.

In my humble opinion, the problem we have is that there is a disconnect. Today, I have heard many hon. Members on both sides of the House give perfectly reasonable speeches responding to the vote last night, which was a huge defeat for the Government, but what I have also heard is that, in most cases, there is no consensus in this House on following through on what the people of this country told us to do. We were told to leave the EU, and in the vote last night—a catastrophic defeat—117 of my colleagues voted against the Government. The rest of those who voted against the Government—the majority of them—did so for a number reasons. Some do not want Brexit at all; some want a second referendum; some want a general election.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con)

Does my hon. Friend share my concern about asking for a second referendum? Why should anyone trust referendums or any electoral process if, when we are given a mandate to do something, we do not follow it through?

Richard Drax

I agree, and in my short speech on Monday I made exactly that point. How can any of us go to our constituency with our political manifesto and tell people, “This is what we are going to do,” when quite clearly we do not do what we say we are going to do? Who in this country will believe us?

This debate is not about personal views. The personal views of Members are hugely diverse and different, and I respect that. There are 650 of us, and I suspect that every right hon. or hon. Member has a view on something, but the people of this country, to whom we gave a vote, told us to execute leaving the EU.

What to do next? I have great sympathy for my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. She has been handed a can of worms—an extremely difficult issue which I suspect no one in this House could manage either better or worse. However, may I suggest that she gets back on her feet and deals more firmly with the EU? I believe that if we, as the United Kingdom, had stood like a rock to say, “We want a deal—of course we do. We want to be your friends and your allies, but we want to be in charge of our destiny,” the EU would by now have said, “We hear you. You are one of our major trading partners. Of course we want to deal with you and remain friends with you, because you are friends of ours and will continue to be so.”

I advise Ministers to go back to the EU as fast as they can—people say there is no time, but the EU has a wonderful way of moving quickly if it needs to. The Prime Minister must say to the EU, “I have heard the voice of the House—the home of democracy. I cannot get this deal through. We need far more flexibility than you have been prepared to offer. For example, remove the backstop.” I think that then she could come back and get the agreement of the House. Then, we could get on with Brexit, which is antagonising millions of people across the country.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con)

How does my hon. Friend interpret what the Prime Minister said last night about reaching out to the other side of the House? If we are to take both sides of the House with us and bearing in mind that a majority of hon. and right hon. Members in this House are for remain and not for leave, does that not mean that the Prime Minister will end up with an even softer Brexit than the one she has proposed?

Richard Drax

Nothing would delight me more than if every single MP in the House said, “Let’s get behind the Prime Minister. Let’s deal with Brexit. Let’s get out of the EU while remaining a good trading partner with them. Let’s get on with our lives.” I am absolutely convinced that this country will do well and prosper and flourish as an independent country, as we were for many hundreds of years before we joined the EU. When we leave, we will flourish. Of that, I have absolutely no doubt. I inform my right hon. Friend that I had a message from the Chief Whip this morning. I asked him to confirm that the date of 29 March is still very much Government policy, and I have it here in black and white that it is.

No one wants a no deal. I have been accused of being an extremist and of this and that. I have been accused of wanting to crash out and all this cliff edge nonsense. I do not want to do that, but we have to have a stick to wield at the EU if we are to negotiate properly. If ultimately it cannot give us a deal, then we leave on WTO terms, which most of the world trades on peacefully and effectively. It will be bumpy—leaving the place after 44 years will be—but we will manage because we are a great country. We will survive, flourish and do well. [Hon. Members: “Survive?”] Not survive. “Flourish” is the word I used. According to the doomsters, we are all doomed. I am saying that we will not be doomed; we will flourish. I say to the Front Bench, let us get on with it and deliver Brexit.

16:32:00

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab)

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax), because his speech shows the level of so many Members' detachment from the absolute reality of the complexity of the Brexit negotiations and what the Prime Minister is trying to achieve. They are divorced from the reality of the negotiations, from the consequences for the people we represent and from the conditions in which people are already living in this country. They say, "We will survive. There will still be food on the table. There will still be Mars bars and packets of crisps", but that was not the promise made to people during the referendum. The people were promised something better. Just as the rats have deserted the sinking ship of the Cabinet, so the promises went with them. My constituents who voted leave are now being offered something far less optimistic than the rosy, pie in the sky promises made during the referendum.

The debate is not about the referendum; it is about whether we have confidence in Her Majesty's Government. It is striking that so few Members are coming along to defend the Government and that so few have bothered to talk about the Government's record. There was one speech during the debate on the withdrawal agreement that captured perfectly why so many people voted to leave. It was made by the hon. Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns), who said:

"I think Brexit was a great cry from the heart and soul of the British people. Too many people in this country feel that the country and the economy are not working for them, and that the affairs of our nation are organised around a London elite. They look at the bankers being paid bonuses for the banks that their taxes helped to rescue. They look at our embassies in the Gulf that are holding flat parties to sell off-plan exclusive London properties, when they worry about how they will ever get on to the housing ladder. They worry that they may be the first generation who are not better off than their parents, and they want to see a system back that spreads wealth and opportunity."— [Official Report, 14 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 922-923.]

What the hon. Gentleman neglected to say, and what so many people sat on the Government Benches will not acknowledge is that every single one of those problems was made in Britain.

It is this place that is responsible for the gross inequality of the country, and it is the party opposite that has prosecuted the policies that have led to half a million more children living in poverty than when we left Government nine years ago. It is the party opposite that has left 4 million working people living in poverty. It is the party opposite that has pursued punitive benefits policies resulting in people sleeping rough not just on the streets of our constituencies, but on the doorsteps and entrances to this Palace, literally dying under our feet. Despite that, it takes not a shred of responsibility and makes not a single offer of hope.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con)

During the remain campaign, the hon. Gentleman and I were on the same side of the debate. I am sure he remembers the Leader of the Opposition not turning up to events, not willing to contribute to the overall UK remain campaign and not playing his part to keep the UK in the EU. What will he do differently this time to get his leader to participate in this debate?

Wes Streeting

This is not the afternoon for the hon. Gentleman to lecture me about holding my leadership to account. This is an afternoon for him and every other Conservative Member to hold their rotten Government to account for the policies that are making his constituents and mine poorer. We have heard a lot about the Leader of the Opposition this afternoon. If they think he is as terrible as they have said, maybe they can explain why, the Prime Minister having confidently called a general election with the promise of a huge sweeping majority, so many Conservative Members lost their seats. I will tell them why. It is because, when it comes to tackling the chronic housing crisis, the

crisis in our schools, the crisis in the NHS and the crisis that hits people in their pockets, the Leader of the Opposition is more in touch with people in this country than the Prime Minister and the Tories will ever be. That is the truth.

Mr Seely

If that is the case, will the right hon. Gentleman explain why so many on his side—173 MPs, I think—refused to back his leadership?

Mr Speaker

The hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) has just been elevated to the Privy Council. I trust his note of appreciation to the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) will be in the internal post today.

Wes Streeting

It has been a long time coming, Mr Speaker.

I say with some humility to the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) that this really is not the afternoon for Conservative Members to talk about motions of no confidence. Not only did more than half their Back Benchers declare no confidence in the Prime Minister and her leadership, but this afternoon is about confidence in the Government. He should be defending the Government's record.

This debate is not just about gross inequality and what is happening to the very poorest in our society. Nine years ago, we were told we had to tighten our belt, that things would be hard and that difficult choices would have to be made, and the majority of people believed and accepted that and voted in the way they thought best. Nine years on, it is the experience of people who use and rely on our public services that things are demonstrably worse than they were nine years ago. Our schools are less well funded than they were when Labour left office, with per pupil funding down by 8% and teachers walking out of the profession in droves.

Some 2.5 million more people are waiting longer than four hours in accident and emergency departments and the number of people waiting more than two months for cancer treatments has doubled. Furthermore—and unbelievably, from a Conservative Government—people in my constituency are describing a state of lawlessness because the Government have cut the Metropolitan police to the bone: more than £1 billion of funding cuts; the loss of 21,000 police officers, almost 7,000 police community support officers and 15,000 police staff; officer numbers at their lowest levels for 30 years; and the highest rises in crime in a decade.

It is no wonder that this afternoon Conservative Members do not want to stand up and defend the record of this Government. It is not a record they can defend. It is now right—in fact, it is past time—to acknowledge that the Government have lost control of Parliament and their ability to govern and have lost the confidence of the British people. It is time for Conservative Members to do the right thing and declare, as we will, no confidence in Her Majesty's Government.

16:38:00

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con)

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting).

It is well documented that I have had my differences with the Prime Minister in recent weeks and months, and it was with regret that I found I could not support her deal in the Lobby last night and

had to vote against it, but I can assure the House that I will be voting against this motion of no confidence this evening, because I want this Conservative Government to remain in office.

The Prime Minister has many qualities, and those qualities have come to the fore in recent times. People across the country admire her resilience, fortitude and determination, and I join them in saying that those are indeed great qualities which she has demonstrated. Let me also say, with respect, that if she now directs those qualities towards the European Commission, her stock in this nation will rise dramatically. The people of this country want to see our Prime Minister stand up to those in the EU and tell them what it needs from the negotiations, and I encourage her to do that.

There is no doubt that the Prime Minister has been given an incredibly challenging job, but that job has been made all the harder by the behaviour of some Members who have sought to undermine her negotiating position time and again. Those who have called for a second referendum have completely undermined her position by making the EU believe that we could have a second vote to overturn the decision, thus making the deal unattractive in the hope that we would reject it, while those who have discounted no deal have undermined her position by taking it off the table. Anyone involved in negotiations will say that no deal must remain a position in any successful negotiation.

I find it very interesting that Labour Front Benchers have said that they would rule out no deal, on the basis that it would be damaging to the country. I do not think no deal would be that damaging to the country—it would be a challenge—and businesses in my community tell me time and again that what they really fear is not a no-deal Brexit but a Labour Government. They are far more afraid of that. Let me say this to those Labour Front Benchers: if you have discounted no deal on the basis that it would be damaging to businesses, will you now please discount a Labour Government on the same criterion? Businesses up and down the country want us to stay in government to prevent Labour from taking office.

It is fair to say that we are not where we want to be in these negotiations. However, I absolutely back the Prime Minister in her position, which is to say that we will continue to seek a consensus across the House in order to establish a basis on which we can renegotiate with the EU and come up with a deal that we can deliver for this country. So I will back the Government tonight. We need to deliver Brexit, we need to deliver the Brexit that we promised the country in our manifesto, and then we need to move on to a domestic agenda so that we can start to deliver the changes that the country needs and is crying out for.

16:42:00

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC)

It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), although I must admit that I share none of his convictions about either the qualities of the Prime Minister or the virtues of no deal.

I thought that something had happened last night, but the pantomime points-scoring is continuing in this place. Last night I voted against the Brexit deal and, in doing so, I voted for the Prime Minister to change course. I voted for averting the damaging consequences of her deal. It is now time to move on to a real solution to this Brexit mess. Parliament cannot come to an agreement on the way forward, so it is time for the people to decide on our European future. However, one thing stands in the way. Labour has, at long last, satisfied one element of its conference policy and it has tabled a motion of no confidence. I will of course support the motion but, if it fails to gain the support of the House tonight, the Labour party must move on and satisfy the next element of its conference motion by adopting a people's vote, as its membership demanded.

Let me be clear: as well as taking no deal off the table, we need to take no progress off the table. Plaid Cymru will reconsider its support if the Leader of the Opposition decides instead to embark on an infinitely failing, hopeless series of motions of no confidence, tabled on a rolling basis, when there is evidence that there is no hope of success and those motions have no chance of making a critical difference. All that that would achieve would be further parliamentary paralysis. I do not think that, in all honesty, anyone in this place wants to see that, and certainly no one outside wants to see it.

With all this in mind, those of us who oppose the British Government's policy need to explain how to avoid a no-deal Brexit when there is seemingly no clear majority under the normal binary voting systems that are the convention in the House of Commons. Several hon. Members have offered credible solutions to break the impasse, including my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards). He has put forward a novel idea to ensure that the House of Commons is able to reach a conclusion on a proposal. The answer could lie in the use of an alternative voting system. My party would always have a preference for a people's vote, and I believe in this method of voting and, with Labour's support, I believe it would be the most preferred option of Members of Parliament across the House of Commons.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con)

If the result in that referendum were again to leave, would the hon. Lady be willing to respect the result the second time and, if the result were to remain, would she be happy with those on the leave side calling for a best of three?

Liz Saville Roberts

What I am proposing here is a means for this place to find its way out of the present impasse. At present, we might be talking about indicative votes, but there may well be other ways. We find ourselves in an unprecedented situation: the procedures we have used in this place in the past appear unlikely to take us out of the impasse. I am begging this place to look at creative means to enable us to move ahead. My party will be moving ahead to propose, with part of that system that we may use, a people's vote as the way ahead. We in this place have been fairly criticised outside for not proposing ways forward. I beg all of us to seek ways forward.

I will not take any more time as I am very much aware, as a member of a small party who usually has very little time to speak, how valuable the time we have is. I conclude by saying that the House of Commons has effectively taken control of Brexit policy. It defeated—we should remember this; this is not just about a tit-for-tat on both sides—the British Government's deeply deficient deal last night. We must now find a way to ensure we can come together for a conclusive decision in favour of a people's vote.

16:47:00

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con)

I rise to support the Government and to speak against this motion. In doing that, I will talk about the record of this Government and the issue that has triggered today's vote: yesterday's Brexit vote.

To put our record in context, everything the Conservatives have done in government since 2010 has had to be framed in the context of the recession, the massive deficit and mess left behind by the Labour party. Despite the mess left behind—the 6% drop in GDP, the 800,000 more people unemployed—under this Conservative party, 3.4 million jobs have been created, we have record employment and record unemployment, we have provided 15 hours of free childcare for

disadvantaged two-year-olds and 30 hours of free childcare for working parents, and the national living wage. We have cut income tax so that people can now earn double nearly what they could under the Labour party before paying income tax. We have not increased fuel duty for eight years and many more of our children are coming out of primary school with a far higher standard of reading and writing than previously. We have more doctors and nurses in our hospitals. We have fewer infections and people dying because of those in our hospitals, and we are putting £20 billion into the NHS and have a 10-year plan for the NHS, under which we are putting significantly more money into mental health provision. In my constituency, the Labour party tried to close A&E and maternity, so Labour does not have the record it states or thinks it has.

Have we got everything right? No, we have not got everything right in government. There is still a lot more to do. We need to make sure we build on the money and extra resources that we are now putting into the police force. We need to make sure we honour the commitment to halve and end rough sleeping. We need to make sure we keep refining universal credit in order to get it right, because having a system that gets people into work is the right thing to do. The alternative is more debt, more borrowing and a leadership team that does not believe in this country and thinks more about other countries than its own.

We are here because of the Brexit debate and Opposition Members have talked about nothing but red lines today. Whether we like what the Prime Minister put on the table yesterday or not, the red lines that she put down were based solely on the referendum in which the British public voted and on manifestos that about 85% of the public voted for. Despite problems across the House and people driving their own agendas, she has tried her best to get a deal that the House can agree with. Clearly it does not do so, but I say to Members opposite that this House voted to have a referendum and the public voted for Brexit. We must deliver on that.

People do not want a general election. They want us to get on with the job and come out of the European Union, and they want us to come together as a House to do that in a sensible way. They do not want a general election, as they do not believe that the Leader of the Opposition is a Prime Minister in waiting. They do not believe that he could be a Prime Minister. I am against this motion and I will be proud to go through the Lobby and vote to back this Government tonight.

16:51:00

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab)

If ever there were an advert for why we need a general election and why we have no confidence in this Government, it has been the speeches from Conservative Members today. They are so divorced from reality. Watching this crisis unfold, I have often been struck by how this process is being viewed by the people we represent. People in North West Durham and beyond voted leave and remain for a number of reasons. They had feelings of being left behind by the establishment, and of seeing their security dwindling and their communities being abandoned. They were worried that their rights were going to be eroded and that their businesses might close. Some wanted to take back control; some wanted to be part of something bigger. Those are all complex, individual reasons, but very few of my constituents have been satisfied by the way in which this Government have represented them in the negotiations with the EU. Instead, we are tangled up in the tensions between two factions of the Conservative party—the hard right and the centre right—and in the arbitrary red lines of the Government. We are in a shameful state, but it goes further than that.

The Government cannot now govern, and not just on our withdrawal from the EU. That is not a slogan; it genuinely reflects the position that we are in. Where are we at, as a country? In the north-east and in North West Durham—in fact, in all our communities—people are suffering. Their pay

does not cover their bills, and the shambolic universal credit system makes them poorer, stigmatised and stressed. After eight years of austerity, this country is on its knees. An increasing number of people are homeless, many are destitute and some—as has been mentioned in a number of fantastic contributions—are even dying as a result of the system.

Do teachers in this country have confidence in this Government? Do nurses, doctors, firefighters, prison officers, those in private businesses waiting for a deal, those waiting for brown envelopes from the DWP to tell them whether they have been sanctioned, those deemed fit for work while ill, those who are homeless, or the 1950s women have confidence in this Government? I think not. The reality is out there and, you know what, I hope it pricks the conscience of the 100-plus Conservative MPs who decided that the Prime Minister was not fit to lead them just a few weeks ago, and of the similar number who agreed with us that the Brexit deal was a farce. Will they now stand up for all those people who are suffering?

The speeches from Conservative Members have been desperate; they are desperate to denigrate the Labour party because they are scared by the powerful arguments of the Leader of the Opposition. When those Members go through the Lobby tonight to say that they have confidence in this Government, they will be voting for more chaos and more austerity. They might as well be stepping over all those children going to school without food in their belly, stepping over the pensioners without the ability to heat their home and stepping over the homeless people on our streets. This will mean that they could not care less about those people. This country, our communities and working people deserve so much better. We deserve a different direction, and fast. We need a general election to get this lot out now.

16:54:00

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con)

In moving this motion of no confidence earlier today, the Leader of the Opposition claimed that it was about delivering Brexit—but this Parliament, elected in 2017, was elected to perform that task. Both main parties, Labour and Conservative alike, stood on a manifesto of respecting the referendum result, and between the two of us we got 82% of the vote. It is our responsibility now, together, each and every one of us, to find a way of making Brexit work for our country. Claiming that the only way to do that is by holding yet another general election is an abdication of the individual responsibility that each and every one of us took upon our shoulders by standing as candidates in the 2017 general election.

But the particular mendacity of the Leader of the Opposition in moving this motion and claiming that he would be given a mandate if he won a general election is that he has absolutely no policy on Brexit at all. Given that he has no policy, he could not possibly have any mandate to do anything, were he to win a general election in the first place. He goes about the north of the country saying that he is in favour of Brexit. He gives remain-leaning constituencies in London and the south the impression that he is in favour of remaining. In a general election campaign, he would collapse under the weight of his own contradictions. He was asked time and again, last night and over the weekend, and by the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) earlier, to articulate his policy on Brexit, and he could not do so. He could not do so because he has no policy. It is up to all of us to pull together and work out a way of delivering Brexit sensibly.

Mr Seely

I think the Leader of the Opposition has 13 policies on Brexit, not none.

Chris Philp

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for clarifying the multiplicity of policies that the Leader of the Opposition adopts at different times when he finds it convenient to do so.

I would say to the Government, though, that they should listen after the vote last night. Clearly the margin of defeat was not a small one. If one thing needs to be changed in order to give this proposal a chance of passing, it is obviously the backstop. My advice to the Government is that we need to speak to the European Union about introducing legally binding changes to the backstop in order to render the withdrawal agreement acceptable to this House. I ask the Government to speak to the European Union on that topic in the coming days.

We have also heard a great deal from Labour Members about the Government's record more generally—particularly from the hon. Members for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock). I am proud to defend this Government's record over the last nine years. I heard education mentioned. It was of course my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), who I see in his place, who, as Education Secretary, introduced reforms that mean that now more children than ever before are attending good and outstanding schools. That is not my judgment or the Government's judgment—it is the judgment of Ofsted. It is the quality of the education that our children receive that really matters.

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

Chris Philp

I will give way again in a moment.

I heard the NHS mentioned as well—of course, a vital institution that we all cherish. Contrary to the dire warnings issued at various general elections about how the NHS is unsafe in Conservative hands, we heard announced just a few weeks ago the biggest ever increase in funding for the NHS—£23 billion a year in real terms. We are seeing that in Croydon already, with a brand new accident and emergency department just opened at Croydon University Hospital. I visited it only last Friday; it is twice the size of the old one. It is a fantastic facility funded by the Department of Health and by this Government.

With regard to poverty and inequality, Labour Members will be aware that absolute poverty has gone down and that income inequality has never been lower. They will be aware that the way we combat poverty is by creating employment, and employment is at a record level as well. I am proud that it is a Conservative Government who have, since 2010, increased the minimum wage by 38%—significantly higher than the rate of inflation. That goes to show that this Government are on the side of working people on low incomes. I will be proud to support them in the Division Lobby this evening.

16:59:00

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind)

It is a pleasure to follow what I will say was a textbook speech from the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp). I agreed with a great deal of what the Leader of the Opposition said in his opening speech and certainly with many of the passionate contributions from my hon. Friends. The past eight years of Conservative or Conservative-led Government have put great strain on our communities. The very fabric that holds our public services and the voluntary sector together has been stretched, because of wrong decisions made by Governments over recent years, which have had an intolerable impact on many people's lives. We have to get justice for the WASPI women, we

must put schools and hospitals on a better footing and, my goodness, we have to sort out our train system, because what is happening in my constituency has been at the worst end of what Northern rail has been inflicting on passengers.

We are now in a dire situation following yesterday's monumental defeat, and this country is facing a national emergency. However, what makes this an almost uniquely serious situation is that this motion of no confidence cannot be taken in a vacuum, because it would lead to a general election that would give the public a choice between a Government that are struggling to govern and a Leader of the Opposition and shadow Chancellor who—I have not changed my view—are simply not fit to hold high office. The public deserve so much better than this choice in this broken political system. They deserve leadership that will right the terrible injustices that have been inflicted on our communities and take them out of this Brexit mess, and they deserve a Government that they can trust to keep them secure.

Aside from the Leader of the Opposition's past positions, of which there has been much discussion today, let me focus on the nuclear deterrent, which is central to my constituency. I have spent many years as an Opposition MP working with my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) and the shadow Defence Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), to keep the Labour party's policy sensible on the face of it. However, do my colleagues really think that, with the spending crisis that any future Labour Government will inherit, we would spend many billions of pounds to maintain a submarine system that the Leader of the Opposition will have rendered useless on day one by saying that he would never use it? That is not a serious proposition.

With a heavy heart, I must tell the House that I cannot support the no-confidence motion tonight—[Interruption.] Some of my hon. Friends mutter, "Disgrace," and I hear others tutting, but many of them are probably privately saying, "Thank God that you have the freedom not to support the motion," because they are wrestling with their consciences. They desperately want a Labour Government, but they know that their party's leader is as unfit to lead the country as he was when they voted against him in the no-confidence motion three years ago.

Mr Marcus Jones

I can understand the hon. Gentleman's dilemma. What would be the effect on his area if we were to abandon the nuclear programme that this country has pursued for decades?

John Woodcock

Barrow-in-Furness is a shipyard town, and the programme is woven into our history. More than 9,000 people in my constituency are directly employed by it, and many more depend upon it. The Leader of the Opposition represents a chance that they cannot afford to take. The Prime Minister must reach out more than she has done in the Chamber today. She must unshackle herself from the hard-line Brexiteers who have led her down the wrong path.

I will commit to trying every day to give my constituents the chance of better leadership for this country. While we are in this impasse, I will do my best to deliver for them. I have been pleased to work with the Government to unlock the marina project, which is vital to the future of the local economy, and on the submarine programme, which is bringing great prosperity to the area. Much more is needed, but I will carry on with that work.

17:04:00

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con)

It is an enormous honour to follow a speech as brave as the one by the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock). I have mentally ripped up what I was going to say and will, I hope, say something in response. I have enormous respect for him and always have done.

Members on both sides of the House, as a whole, work extremely hard to represent their constituencies as they see fit. Since I got here, I have been very impressed by the hard work and dedication of Labour Members. I have enjoyed the cross-party working in which I have been involved, particularly in the justice sphere, where the Select Committee on Justice has made real change to people's lives, and on early pregnancy loss and baby loss. We have worked across parties to make a real difference, and I hope my remarks will be taken in that context.

I am not going to speak up for the deal, and I am not going to speak up for the Prime Minister, though I do strongly support both; unusually for me, I will talk about personalities, as the hon. Gentleman did.

The Leader of the Opposition has been an anti-war and anti-nuclear campaigner all his life, as far as I know. He would prefer to live in a republic. He supports Hamas, the IRA and various other unfashionable organisations around the world. He has voted against his Whip more often than any other Labour Member. He has been monitored by MI5 for 30 years and by special branch for 20 years because they are worried that he will undermine parliamentary democracy. He describes Karl Marx as "a great economist." The Prime Minister, who is never one to attack someone personally, mentioned his remarks following the Skripal attack.

What we need to focus on is the Leader of the Opposition's position on Europe. He opposed joining the European Community in 1975. He opposed Maastricht and Lisbon. He wants to be free of EU rules on state aid and industry.

The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), who supports the Leader of the Opposition in this place, is the chap who threw the little red book on the Table during my first Budget as an MP. He is the gentleman who thinks my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Ms McVey) should be lynched, and he wanted to assassinate Mrs Thatcher. He says that he would back a second referendum only if the option to remain were not present.

This is not acceptable. We need clarity from the Opposition at this important point for the nation. We need to know what their policy is. I was a civil servant and I find it very easy to work across parties, but, like the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness, not with a party with this leadership. I joined the civil service in 1997, and one of the reasons I became a Conservative MP is that I saw that the quality of decision making improved in 2010 under the coalition Government, but that does not mean there is not good on the Opposition Benches, and we need to harness it. However, in agreement with the hon. Gentleman, I do not think anybody can have confidence in the current Labour leadership.

For those reasons alone, and for all the many good reasons mentioned by my hon. and right hon. Friends, I have complete confidence in this Government.

17:08:00

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP)

As we appear to be in a political twilight zone, I feel the need to say a few home truths. I have never had confidence in this Government. Whether it be on Brexit, social security, immigration or pensions, I have no confidence in them, and I cannot believe anyone does.

I have no confidence in the Prime Minister, because she knew what the outcome of the vote on her deal would be, so much so that she delayed the vote, and then she came back and acted like it was a surprise that her deal failed. All that happened is she wasted a month, and she did so in the full knowledge that time is running out.

Regrettably, I have to say the same about the Leader of the Opposition, and I do say this sincerely. I cannot get my head around how the right hon. Gentleman has delayed calling for a vote of no confidence. He delayed it in the initial farce, and he failed to support the motion of no confidence from the Scottish National party and other parties. I find myself left asking the same question: what good did it do? All that happened is that this lot have had another month in power. I find myself questioning his logic of, “I am waiting for the perfect moment, the opportune moment.” I think we will find at the end of this debate that that moment has passed.

I sincerely hope that the Leader of the Opposition will eventually come clean about whether he thinks this should be taken back to the people or not, because this deadlock evasiveness cannot last—it cannot continue. People deserve better. To be honest, we all deserve a better Opposition. The only thing I have any confidence in is the people of Scotland: the wealth of talent, intellect and compassion that we have to offer the world. I have no doubt that people in Scotland will be watching this entire farce back home and reaching the conclusion that the only thing they can have confidence in is the ability of our country to look after ourselves a damn sight better than this place ever has. If the Government and the Prime Minister truly mean that she wants to reach out and have cross-party support, a good start would be listening to the will of the second largest nation in this United Kingdom and giving us the respect that we are due.

17:11:00

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con)

I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black); it is great to see her in her place. Mr Speaker, you were absolutely right earlier to point out the exuberance on these Benches during the speech made by the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford). I am sure you will understand the passion and frustration we sometimes feel when we hear SNP Members talking about “the voice of Scotland” and “Scottish voices”. I am proud to be part of a 1,200% increase in Scottish seats represented on the Government Benches.

Let Members be in no doubt that I shall be voting tonight to support the Prime Minister and her Government, and I welcome the opportunity to do so. It is clear that a third general election in the space of less than four years would not be in the national interest, especially at such a crucial time for the future of our country. The truth is that an election would not solve anything: it would not give us certainty; it would not change the EU and its negotiating positions; and it would not change the choices before us. It would only be a recipe for delay and division. People across the country can see what is going on here: politicians on the benches opposite are seeking to exploit the issues of historic importance currently facing this country, for party political advantage. They will have none of it, I will have none of it, and this House should have none of it.

When I vote tonight, I will be voting as a Unionist, to support a Government who have been resolutely committed to protecting our precious Union. This Prime Minister and this Government have stood up for the interests of the majority of Scots, who voted to keep the United Kingdom together in 2014 and who still do not want another independence referendum. By the way, a majority of Scots—a similar percentage, of about 56%—voted for parties committed to Brexit in the 2017 general election. Over the past 19 months, this Government have consistently stood up to

the grandstanding and grievance-mongering of the SNP, which does not speak for the whole of Scotland, as it would have us believe. Throughout this process, the Prime Minister has also worked tirelessly to ensure that Northern Ireland remains a stable part of the United Kingdom. I was glad to hear the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) express his support for the Government on this motion.

The contrast between the heartfelt and committed Unionism of this Government and the hopeless pandering of the Labour party could not be clearer. We all know about the Leader of the Opposition's thoughts on Northern Ireland, but Scottish Unionists are increasingly coming to recognise that they can no longer trust Labour to stand up for Scotland's place in the United Kingdom. As recently as September, the Leader of the Opposition equivocated on the possibility of doing a deal with the SNP and allowing Nicola Sturgeon to impose Indyref 2 on the Scottish people. I remind my English, Welsh and Northern Irish colleagues that this is not a specifically Scottish issue; it is all of the United Kingdom that the SNP wishes to break apart.

Time and again, here and in Holyrood, Scottish Labour has sided with the SNP's attempts to use Brexit to undermine the Union. Only this Government—a Conservative Government led by this Prime Minister—have a track record to be trusted on protecting our Union. That, foremost in my mind among eight and a half years of Conservative achievements in government, is why I shall support the Government tonight.

Mr Speaker

Just before I call the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), I should announce that she is the last speaker to be subject to the four-minute limit. As I am seeking to accommodate as many colleagues as I can, a three-minute limit will then have to be introduced, so the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) will be subject to a three-minute limit. I call Ann Clwyd.

17:15:00

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab)

I am going to read a letter from a constituent—a real person—that I received this morning by email:

“Dear Ann Clwyd MP

I am your constituent and I am deeply concerned at what Brexit uncertainty is already doing to our country. No form of Brexit commands a majority among politicians. There is only one sensible road left to pursue, and that is to take the decision back to the voters and let us decide.

Parliament is deadlocked. The government's version of Brexit has failed and been rejected by Parliament. Two years of uncertainty, divisive argument and no clear solutions to the country's biggest problems has got us nowhere.

Best for Britain's new research, carried out in partnership with HOPE not hate, proves 60% of people now want the final say on Brexit. Every region now supports letting the people decide. I have included the regional results below.

I would appreciate it if you could reply to this message to tell me: Do you support giving the people the final say on the Brexit deal, with the option to stay in the EU?

Please understand the strength of my feeling on this issue. There is no majority in Parliament for any form of Brexit. While Parliament is in deadlock, the country is uniting around a referendum to resolve it. Please give us the final say.”

My constituent then lists the proportion in support of a public vote on Brexit by region and country:

“East of England, 56.00%

East Midlands, 56.80%

London, 67.60%

North East, 59.80%

North West, 61.20%

South East, 57.80%

South West, 55.10%

West Midlands, 57.90%

Yorkshire and Humber, 58.90%

Scotland, 67.70%

Wales, 60.30%”.

He finishes with:

“Yours sincerely,

David Matthews

Cilfynydd, Wales”.

My answer to him is: I support a referendum and I want to stay in the European Union.

Mr Speaker

A three-minute limit is now to apply.

17:18:00

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con)

This House can have confidence in the Government because they have taken the country from the brink of bankruptcy to the point where we have a successful and growing economy that is creating prosperity and better opportunities for people in every part of the country. They recognise the hopes and aspirations of hard-working people—people who work hard and want their children to have better chances than they had.

The Government are giving children the best possible start in life, by doubling free childcare for three and four-year-olds. Next year, there will be more record spending on early years education. The reforms—originally made in the face of hostile opposition—by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), when he was Secretary of State for Education, are now delivering improved standards in schools. From a record low of 19th in international comparators for reading under the Labour Government, we have risen to eighth under this one. I know that the Opposition do not like the figures for the number of children in good and outstanding schools, but the fact remains that in 2010, under the Labour Government, 66% of children were taught in good or outstanding schools, and that has now risen to 87%—

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab)
There are more children!

Mike Wood

Yes, that is 87% of a bigger number—of course it is. It is even better. And that is despite the well-recorded increase in the difficulty of inspections.

Tracy Brabin

I thank the hon. Gentleman so much for giving way. I do appreciate it. I know that we are short of time. Does he agree that there are more children in good and outstanding schools because there are more children? Do his figures include the poorest children?

Mike Wood

I hesitate to explain basic mathematics. A rise from 66% to 87% of a bigger number is even more of an increase.

When people are looking for work, they are more likely to get a job. There have been, on average, 1,000 new jobs every day since the Government came to power in 2010. Four fifths of them are full time. Most jobs are more likely to be paid more, thanks to the introduction of the national living wage and increases in the national minimum wage. At the end of all that, people are allowed to keep more of the money that they have worked so very hard to earn. While Labour doubled the starting tax rate for the lowest paid workers, the Government have taken 5 million low-paid workers out of paying income tax altogether.

Let us turn now to people who are looking for their first home. House building had collapsed ahead of 2010 as a result of the recession, but rates of house building are higher now than in 29 of the past 30 years. The Government recognise people's aspirations to own their own home, but they also recognise the need for good social and private rented housing as well. While the Opposition are dogmatically opposed to letting people buy the houses in which they live, the Government are supporting first-time buyers and lifting the cap on housing revenue account borrowing to allow for more council-built social housing.

At every stage in life, spending on the NHS will be £20 billion higher at the end of this five-year period than at the start. That is on top of the 15,000 extra doctors and the nearly 13,000 more nurses in our hospitals compared with 2010. Hard-working families deserve better than the paleo-Marxist Citizen Smith tribute act that is offered by the Opposition Front Bench team—

Mr Howarth

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is the term “pilllock” considered unparliamentary?

Mr Speaker

I do not think that that word was used. I think the word was “paleo”. It is rather unfair that the point of order came when it did, and the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) should certainly have 10 seconds to finish his speech.

Mike Wood

Economic security, greater opportunity, sustainable investment in our public services and many other reasons are why Dudley South and this House can have confidence in Her Majesty’s Government this evening.

17:22:00

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op)

I rise to say that I have no confidence in Her Majesty’s Government. In doing so, I will not address the domestic record of the Government—I wish that I had time to do so as it has been one of hunger and homelessness, and that is a record that needs revealing, but in three minutes that is clearly not possible.

The Government genuinely deserve to lose this vote today because there is only one reason for their existence, and only one reason why the Prime Minister is the Prime Minister, and that is Brexit. The job of this Government was to deliver Brexit. After the referendum, the majority of MPs accepted the result and wanted to work pragmatically on a deal to secure the best terms of our new relationship. We did not do so lightly. Let us not forget that the referendum was called only to try to solve some internal problems in the Conservative party. David Cameron had expected that there would be another hung Parliament and that the Liberal Democrats would be in coalition with him again and that he could drop the idea entirely, and he got it wrong.

As a result, we all got the most divisive politics that this country has had in the modern era. The denigration of expertise and reason became the new normal. All of us saw our friend murdered in that campaign, and yet, despite that, there was no doubt that this House had, and still does have, a cross-party majority for a Brexit deal. But how did the Prime Minister respond to that? Did she reach out across party lines? No. Did she seek to unite leavers and remainers? No. Did she provide leadership on the big questions? Absolutely not. Instead, we had this played from the beginning for narrow party advantage. Reasonable concerns about how customs would work, how the banking system would function, the rights of EU citizens and even which queue at passport control EU citizens would use were first dismissed and then, cynically and falsely, presented as opposition to Brexit itself. When an election was called, despite the Prime Minister giving her word, Downing Street briefed it as a chance to “Crush the saboteurs”. Well, how ironic that the deal’s biggest saboteur has turned out to be the Prime Minister herself, and it is her deal that has been crushed.

We all appreciate that the Conservative party is irrevocably split on this issue, and its decision on the final destination risks losing one half of its Members entirely. But the answer to that is to reach out and have a conversation with all of the House of Commons. Instead of that, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) was appointed Foreign Secretary and travelled around Europe insulting our friends. Then there was the nationalistic rhetoric of the “citizens of nowhere” speech and the idea at Conservative conference that we could list foreign workers, as if we were living in 1930s Germany. Then we had the Chancellor threatening our friends and allies with economic warfare as if the UK were some overgrown school bully. All of this has squandered centuries of good will and landed us where we are.

It is this Prime Minister, this Government, these red lines and this strategy that are to blame for bringing this country to the abyss. The Government have nothing left to offer; and, in the national interest, they should go.

17:25:00

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con)

Well, it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), although I could not disagree more with his characterisation of the situation.

I remember a Labour Prime Minister who promised this country a referendum on the Lisbon treaty, and virtually his last act in government was to sign it and renege on that promise to the British people. I feel that the resentment, after years of broken Labour promises in relation to referendums, bears a large part of the blame in the outcome of the referendum vote. That is not to mention the absolutely miserable way in which the Leader of the Opposition failed to campaign or make a proper case for remaining in the EU during the referendum debate. I will therefore take no lectures from the Labour party.

The hon. Gentleman talked about reaching out, but there is no explanation as to how the Labour policy would get over the line in terms of state aid because the Opposition say that they want a customs union, but they do not want to accept rules on state aid. They also say that they can negotiate a better deal, but do not want to accept the rules on free movement. The reality of the Labour party's position is that it would fail its own six tests.

I am a Member of this House who has shown a willingness to work across parties to get a decent and sensible Brexit result, despite the fact that I personally believe that the best deal that we have is remaining in the EU. I made a promise to try to implement the referendum result, but I do not see that there have been any constructive proposals from the Opposition Front Bench.

The reason that I have confidence in the Government—and I do—is that, although the press has been taken over with Brexit, we have been getting on with the job and delivering in so many other ways. Some 39,000 workers in my constituency have been taken out of tax because of the Government's proposals. I remember Gordon Brown introducing a 10p tax rate on those earning just over £4,500; the lowest paid had to pay tax. Now, a low-paid worker in my constituency will not pay tax until they are earning at least £12,500. That is one of many achievements by the Government.

We have introduced a new benefit of two weeks' paid parental leave, which is one of the first new benefits that we have introduced for many years and is a significant achievement. There are also very good environmental policies coming out of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. There is a good record of which to be proud.

17:28:00

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab)

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach).

The unsettled mood that we feel in the Chamber today and across the whole of Parliament, is reflected across the whole of our society. Out there in the communities, there is a feeling and a desire for change—for something else. This feeling and desire for change manifests itself in different ways, but we would be wrong to ignore it and to underestimate its significance. It

manifests itself in the anger that is felt in our communities, including the increased hate that all of us across the House are receiving. It manifests itself in the despair at, and dissociation from, democracy and the lack of faith in anybody in Parliament.

This is a pivotal moment, and it is about more than whether we think we should have a Labour Government or a Conservative Government, although of course the answer is Labour. It is about how we give back trust and faith to ordinary people. This feeling and mood for change is not going to go away. People are exhausted—they are exhausted by austerity. I do not think anybody in this House appreciates quite how draining poverty is and how the daily grind can get you down.

Even if Members ignore every other word I say, I would like them to reflect on this statistic: across Yorkshire, there has been a 30% increase in the number of suicides. As I have mentioned before, my constituency covers the Humber bridge, which has become a hotspot for suicides. People are driving there from around the country to take their own lives. What greater damning indictment of this Government can there be that they have left people in such a state of despair, feeling that they have no future whatever?

What answers are people being offered? Nothing. We have more arguments and Members tearing into each other on the Government Benches, while the people in our communities continue to suffer. They suffer when they go to the NHS. In terms of the nonsense spouted at us about all the good and outstanding schools, I suggest, with respect, that the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) checks the last time that those schools were inspected, which might give him a more accurate figure. Crime is increasing, and people feel unsafe in their homes. The antisocial behaviour that so many people here probably ignore because the gates to their properties allow them to cannot be ignored by the people in our communities.

This is a moment when we can really make a difference. It is in our gift to give people the change they need. We can channel that need for change into a positive vision for hope, but only if we vote down this Government and have a Labour Government, who will truly deliver for everybody in our country.

17:31:00

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con)

Even though I respect the comments made by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), I am concerned that she sees everything in a very different light from me. I am much more optimistic about our future.

The motion before us may seem simplistic, and yet it raises questions that go much further. We are in the midst of a battle for the heart and soul of our country and all the things we hold dear. The decisions we take in this place today and over the coming weeks will irreversibly change the course of our history. They will shape Britain's standing in the world for a generation and, in the process, will perhaps determine the future of this Parliament—the mother of all Parliaments, which has served our nation through war and peace for the best part of 1,000 years.

On the central question of Europe, which has led us to this position, I make the following points. Like the long-time Brexiteers, I am fully committed to ensuring that the UK can end its membership of the European Union at 11 pm on 29 March, as set down in law. Nothing less than an agreement that ends the free movement of people and returns full control over our money and laws is acceptable to me and the majority of the people of Erewash who voted to leave in the referendum in

June 2016. My message for the remainers is that I voted to remain in the European Union, but we lost that argument, and consequently the UK will be leaving the EU.

Europe may have brought us to this point, but that does not detract from the fact that the single biggest threat to the safety, security and prosperity of our country is sat on the Opposition Benches. The choice before us today is clear: do we want a socialist Government who, within hours of being returned to office, would cause a “run on the pound”, in the words of the shadow Chancellor; a socialist Government who would drive investment out of Britain through their ideological pursuit of nationalisation; a socialist Government whose own Back Benchers advocate the confiscation of council houses bought under the right-to-buy scheme; and a socialist Government who would make my constituents poorer in every sense of the word? I cannot let that happen to my constituents in Erewash or countenance such outcomes. The Government have my full support and confidence today and in the future.

17:34:00

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

Margaret Thatcher famously quoted Attlee in saying that referendums were the instruments of “demagogues and dictators” because Hitler used them to adopt supreme power and, basically, invade other countries after rearming. My reason for having no confidence in the Prime Minister is not simply because she has doubled the debt and created poverty and social injustice, but because she thinks the advisory referendum is an unconditional mandate to brexit at any cost, in any circumstances, without consulting the people on whether this represents their reasonable expectations.

The people were offered more money and more trade, and control over their laws and over migration, but in fact they have not got any of those things. We will have to pay £39 billion. There will be a squeezing of the economy, fewer jobs and less trade. We will not be with team EU when negotiating with big players such as China. Northern Ireland will be an open border for immigration via Dublin. We will not control our immigration and, if we did, we would in any case just switch from a cultural neighbour to more distant immigration.

There is no evidence that the people of Britain support the deal. It is a betrayal of conservatism because it moves us away from our most established market in the world and breaks up the Union. It is a betrayal of socialism because we will have a smaller cake to divide more equally. It is bad for our economy, our security, our environment and our common values.

It is my view that I have no confidence in the Prime Minister because she has no confidence in the people to make a judgment on the deal she has delivered. If they want it, let us go ahead. If we do not have that vote, we will just wait another two years in the transition period, when we could in fact have a vote on this, decide on reflection it is better for all of us to remain and have two years sorting out this country, rather than having this situation where we just talk about Brexit and Britain is burning around us.

Yes, there will be some anger if we have a people’s vote, but I put it to the House that there will be absolute rage if we do not and Brexit goes forward. People voted to leave; they did not vote to leave their jobs. Brexit is now being seen warts and all, and we are also seeing that Europe is a much more virtuous place than before. It was a massive defeat last night. Yes, the Prime Minister needs to look cross-party at all the options. If we cannot agree any deal, let us put the deal we have to the people, and they can decide whether to continue.

In the meantime, I am calling for a general election, but if we do not get a general election, we should have a people's vote. The Labour party should stand up for remain and, when we win that, there should be an election because we will have had a Government who were elected on a strong and stable Brexit but are weak and unstable. We will then deliver a Labour Government and a better Britain.

17:37:00

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con)

I am obviously not terribly delighted that we are having a vote of confidence in the Conservative Government, but I suppose I might thank the Opposition for bringing my party back together today. We were heavily divided last night, but I can be confident that we are all going to go through the same Lobby together. It will be a bonding experience, so thank you very much for doing that for us.

It is of course quite right that we are having a vote of no confidence. We find ourselves in a peculiar hung Parliament in which, as the Leader of the Opposition said, the Government suffered a major defeat last night and have suffered a defeat on a money Bill. It is quite right that the confidence of the House is tested. However, we are all quite aware of what will happen. The Government are going to win this vote this evening, and then we are going to have to move on. The most interesting question is not about this vote, which is a foregone conclusion. It is about what is going to happen after that.

We know what the Prime Minister is going to do. She has offered to reach out, speak to other corners of the Commons and look for some consensus, but we still do not know what the Opposition are asking for. The fact that we have been put on the spot in a vote of no confidence, when the Opposition have not said what they would take to the public in the event of a general election is, quite frankly, shameful. That reminds me of how, in 1997, the Labour party managed to breeze into power without telling the public—[Interruption.] Yes, it won by a convincing majority, but it did not tell the public in advance what its policy was on the single European currency. That had to be wrung out of Labour when it was already in power. The Labour party has a track record on this. If it wants to go to the country, it at least should have the courtesy to tell the public what it would take into that vote.

Helen Jones

Record spending in the NHS.

Alex Burghart

Record debt is what we would have. The hon. Lady's party is offering this country and my voters—my tax-paying constituents—a thousand billion pounds of extra debt. That is £35,000 extra for everyone who lives in this country.

Helen Jones

rose—

Alex Burghart

I am very happy to give way and take the extra time.

Helen Jones

The hon. Gentleman, perhaps because he is rather younger than me, seems to have forgotten that, when the Labour party took office, NHS waiting lists were 18 months for some specialties. Under

the Labour Government, there were practically no waiting lists in some specialties. We are all proud of that record.

Alex Burghart

And when the hon. Lady's party left power, we had record debt, a crashed economy and a loss of confidence in our foreign policy after the disastrous Iraq war. The Labour party ran this country into the ground. Eight years later, we have record employment, we have rising wages—we have everything a sensible, evenly minded, well-balanced economy has brought. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker

Order. There is a very unseemly atmosphere, but the hon. Gentleman is at least still smiling, and that is to be welcomed. [Interruption.] Order. Let us hear the hon. Gentleman.

Alex Burghart

Thank you, Mr Speaker. The truth is that the Labour party left power under an enormous cloud. Everybody knows it. It left after a disastrous 13 years in office, in which the economy was destroyed, and Government Members are united in our desire to ensure that it does not have an opportunity to do that again. Let us be frank: the Blair-Brown years were a golden age compared with what would come after a general election this year, should the Labour party force one upon us. We would rather have Blair and Brown than Corbyn and McDonnell any day of the week, but those options are not available to the British public.

17:42:00

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab)

I thank the Leader of the Opposition for tabling this motion of no confidence, which I will support in the Lobby this evening.

I came into politics challenged with trying to make a difference to the lives of the ordinary people of Bradford West—trying to be part of a system that is about putting people first, not about people clinging to power and positions, with self-preservation at the heart of everything they do. I have lived experience of destitution and poverty. A generation later, constituents come to my surgery in sheer destitution, crying because they do not know how they are going to feed their children or meet their basic needs, and the reality of insecure jobs and in-work poverty leads people with dependants further into destitution. We must ask whether this Government are fit for purpose.

I have spent a short time in the House. Although the final nail in the coffin was yesterday's catastrophic defeat—the largest defeat of any Government in the history of our democracy—the real tragedy for me and my constituents is that this Government have not been fit for purpose for a very long time. This Government were not fit for purpose when the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights described the level of child poverty in the UK as

“not just a disgrace, but a social calamity and an economic disaster”

in the fifth largest economy in the world. This Government were not fit for purpose when they pursued a policy of rolling out a hostile environment, which led to the tragedies of the Windrush scandal. This Government were not fit for purpose when they were found in contempt of Parliament.

This Government are not fit for purpose when they are repeatedly defeated in the courts by single parents and people with disabilities, and forced to go back to the drawing board on their own

policies. This Government were not fit for purpose when they failed again last year to stop the increase in homelessness on the streets of Britain, and even failed to save the life of the poor man who died outside the doors of Parliament just weeks ago. This Government were not fit for purpose when Conservative Members decided to use food banks for photo ops. This Government are not fit for purpose when films such as “I, Daniel Blake” are no longer a fiction but many people’s reality.

This Government have consistently acted in the interests of the few, not the many, offering tax giveaways to the rich while viciously cutting services for the most vulnerable in this country. The Government were not fit for purpose when the Prime Minister knew her deal was dead before the recess but chose to sabotage and hold Parliament hostage by delaying the vote. The list goes on. How can those 117 Conservative colleagues who voted that this Prime Minister was not fit to lead their party go back to the electorate and say that she is fit to lead the country?

17:45:00

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con)

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah).

I would argue that, when Members consider their position on the confidence motion tonight, their assessment should be based not on just one vote—however fundamental that issue is for the nation’s future—but on this Government’s record in office. Three practical measures of a Government’s relative success are taxation levels for working families, employment levels and investment in public services. It must be remembered that it is this Government who have cut taxes for 32 million working people, so that they keep more of the money they earn. It is this Government who have seen unemployment not just decline but plummet to a record low. It is this Government who are investing more than £20 billion in the NHS for our future health—and through Barnett consequential that will benefit NHS Scotland immensely. In the same period, all the Opposition Front Bench has achieved is an ever-changing conviction and little consensus on every issue. In fact, the only point of consensus appears to be that the Government have got it wrong on every issue. That is clearly not the case, and the facts do not support the Opposition’s somewhat gloomy assessment.

This Government are pressing ahead with ongoing investment in research and development, with growth deals throughout the country, such as the one emerging in Ayrshire. They recognise the importance of the environment and have produced the 25-year environment plan—something never done before in the United Kingdom. They have secured a stable economy after a very weak inheritance, and they listen when changes are needed—for example, to universal credit. They are not a Government in crisis, as the Opposition allege in order to secure an election. They are a Government who are getting on with the business of governing.

The Prime Minister has worked incredibly hard on those and other issues over the past two years, and I earnestly encourage hon. Members to support the Government tonight. With everything else that is going on and the Conservatives being the only party with a clear desire to honour the referendum, this is not the time to hold an unnecessary and unwanted general election. It is time to get on with what we have been asked to do, before our constituents lose faith in every parliamentarian in this House. I have every confidence in Her Majesty’s Conservative and Unionist Government, and I will be voting for them tonight.

17:47:00

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green)

Last night's defeat was an extraordinary humiliation for the Prime Minister. If ever there were a situation to be described as chickens coming home to roost, it was that, for it is a national calamity of the Prime Minister's own making. It was the Prime Minister who failed to reach out across the House to find consensus on a way forward from the narrow win for leave in the 2016 referendum. It was the Prime Minister who painted herself into a corner with a series of bright red lines, designed only to appease the most extreme Brexiteers in her party. It was the Prime Minister who triggered article 50 far too prematurely. Crucially, it was also the Prime Minister who resolutely failed to tackle any of the underlying injustices that drove the 2016 referendum result.

Many people voted leave because they believed that the status quo in this country is intolerable, and they are right—it is. We are a country of grotesque inequalities, not just between classes but geographically between regions, especially between north and south, and between thriving cities and failing towns within the same region. Last year, the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission identified the 30 worst places for social mobility. Every single one of them voted to leave. I do not think that is a coincidence. The Prime Minister's mantra about bringing the country back together rings very hollow in the light of the evidence.

Welfare cuts since 2010 have cost lone parent households an average of more than £5,000, increasing child poverty rates in those households from 37% to 62%. The NHS has endured the longest period of austerity in its history. The evidence goes on. Today has to be the day we start to change the conversation about Brexit and the future of Britain. We have to do that not by slavishly repeating that Brexit is the will of the people, but by genuinely hearing the voices of those who have been economically and politically excluded for decades. The millions of people who rightly chose to give the establishment an almighty kicking in June 2016 deserve to have their concerns addressed and properly resolved.

A people's vote, if it learns the lessons from the failed remain campaign of 2016, can be the vehicle we need to have that honest debate in this country. It would be the chance to move on from the divisive and dangerous place we are in by committing to "Project Hope", rather than "Project Fear". Whoever is in No. 10 must be someone who can put the issue back to the people, because a general election fought by the two biggest parties, which both have a commitment to Brexit, does not take us forward. While I of course want to get rid of this toxic Government, I also want to ensure that we resolve this most pressing issue and get the question back to the people. Parliament has shown itself to be incapable of resolving it; the question needs to go back to the people.

17:50:00

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con)

As ever, it is a huge pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas). We have heard a lot about polls today. I will give the House a couple. We all know the figures of 52% and 48%, and it is intrinsic and beholden on the House to respect the referendum result, but another figure is 34%, which is the current polling for the Labour party. That is quite incredible at this time. The reasons for that figure were encapsulated by the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), who said that the shadow Chancellor and the Leader of the House are simply unfit for high office. As people get closer to the potential of a buy-in decision, they will see that very starkly indeed. The other reason for the 34% polling is the six tests—the magic unicorn tests—which are designed to fail. The public are not foolish and they are not going to be hoodwinked. They know intrinsically that the six tests are sophistry of the most politically contemptible sort. At some point—later today, or tomorrow—the grown-ups will have to have a conversation about what the Opposition actually want.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con)

What people and businesses in Basingstoke tell me is that they want certainty. How can they get certainty when there are challenges in the Government, and Parliament rejected the Government's plans yesterday?

Julian Knight

Certainty is all. I will be speaking about that in the Adjournment debate later—Jaguar Land Rover wants certainty, too. It is a little rich when people talk about the rights of EU citizens and UK citizens and then reject a deal that would protect those rights.

A second referendum would be a stain on this Parliament. The division would be enormous, and we have been entrusted. No deal makes no sense to me with the dislocation that it could cause to our economy. People talk about stockpiling, emergency provision and so on, but the reality would be what happens when the stocks run out or if we end up with dislocation. What happens if we then have to go to the EU and negotiate certain terms at that point? We would be in a very weak position. Both those options are out, so we have to come together sensibly.

Despite this stunt today—we will see Members filling up their Facebook pages with how many different times they can say different words to link in with their Momentum groups—it is time for sensible, grown-up people to face the consequences of the circumstances we are in. That is what the public want. They do not like this spectacle at all.

Let me look at the achievements of this Government. In 2010 we inherited a deficit at 11% of GDP. Let me be clear to the House that that is such an enormous sum that it cannot be borrowed for very long. Eventually, the markets call in the loans and the country ends up having to pay such a high interest rate that the economy ends up in a depression.

We, as a Government, had to sort that out, but we did it while protecting the NHS. We have announced an increase in NHS spending that is twice the level that Labour proposed at the 2017 general election. Not everything is perfect in that respect, and there are issues, but we are trying to solve them. When it comes to the big matter of the economy, however, to jobs, to healthcare, to the 1 million kids in better or outstanding schools, the Government are delivering. We have to get through Brexit and then we will deliver more.

17:54:00

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab)

The provocation for this debate was the unprecedented defeat of the central plank of the Government's policy, which should have led seamlessly to a general election. In the Brexit debate earlier this week, I spoke about the threat that Brexit posed to the prosperity, opportunities and security of my constituents and many of my businesses, but I also represent some of the poorest communities in the UK, and although I am proud of the work it does, I am not proud to have the busiest food bank in London.

Last week, I spent an afternoon at one of St Mungo's homeless hostels in West Kensington talking to residents and staff. They told me that the annual street homelessness count, to be published on 31 January, would show it had doubled in the last year, and they gave me three reasons: universal credit, the increase in no recourse to public funds and tenancy takeover, which is where drug dealers seize the premises of vulnerable tenants. The war on the poor, the hostile environment and a descent into lawlessness—three of the worst consequences of austerity.

The cuts in police numbers, especially neighbourhood officer numbers, is putting whole communities at risk. I spent part of new year's eve at a crime scene in Fulham. An attempted murder led to the arrest of 40 people and the recovery of a number of dangerous weapons. I estimate that half the people I now see in my surgery have problems that would have made them eligible for legal aid before the passage of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012.

Yesterday, my clinical commissioning group, looking to make £44 million of cuts to its budget, began consulting on reducing opening hours for urgent care centres and GPs. That is not just bad in itself but in direct contradiction to the NHS strategy that calls for an extension of those services to justify the closures of A&Es and emergency beds. For the first time in a generation, we are seeing year-on-year real-terms cuts to school budgets. Inner-city schools do not just educate but give emotional and practical support to families struggling with poverty and poor living standards.

Perhaps the Government's worst betrayal is the 80% cut—100% under the former London Mayor—to funding for social housing when 800,000 people are on waiting lists. My local council and the Mayor of London are doing the best they can to alleviate the conditions I have described, but for real change we need a Labour Government. The Prime Minister's legacy will be to have ruined this country in half the time it took the Thatcher and Major Governments. Enough is enough. We need a general election and a Labour Government.

17:57:00

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con)

This debate should be one of two halves. First, it is right that the Opposition challenge the Government on their record, but the second part ought to be that the Opposition seek to become the Government themselves and present a vision for the country, but they have demonstrably failed to demonstrate one that they could deliver in a few weeks if they won an election. That part has been wholly absent from this debate so far.

On referendum day three years ago, I spent a lot of time talking to constituents and visiting polling stations around my constituency in Wigan and Bolton, and it was startling. The polling stations in the poorest neighbourhoods and communities had turnouts they had never seen before—far higher than for local and general elections. This vote, this referendum on the EU, reached out in a way that politicians here had not done before, or at least not for decades. That is one of the key reasons it is so important to respect the referendum decision. People who perhaps had never voted before, or at least not for decades, or who thought that previous elections were not important enough for them to engage with, chose in this referendum to engage with politics and the life of the country. It is vital for the Government to respect that decision now. We are leaving the European Union on 29 March this year. If that decision is delayed by the suspension or even the cancellation of article 50, it will be a sign to the electorate—to all voters, whether leave or remain—that their decision is being disrespected. Worse still, if there is a second referendum to dismiss the first, we will be telling them, “Your vote was wrong; get it right the second time.” That is repugnant, and it would be deeply damaging to our democracy.

I urge the Government to focus on delivering Brexit, to focus on delivering on 29 March, and to use the days that we have left as an opportunity to secure the best possible deal from the European Union; but on 29 March, we must leave.

18:00:00

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD)

I will vote for the motion, not just because of the Government's failure on Brexit but because of their failure on so many issues, including rising crime, the railways, the social care disaster and the schools budget. I think that the speech of the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) encapsulated that better than any other.

Brexit, however, is on everyone's mind. We have to ask why the Government are unable to deliver on Brexit, and we have to conclude that it is fundamentally because the Conservative party is split. It is absolutely divided. We saw that in the Lobbies last night, but we have also seen it in the record number of resignations from this Prime Minister's Government: 32 in just three years. That is another dreadful record, which shows that this Government are incapable of governing.

Julian Knight

I wonder whether the right hon. Gentleman knows how many Opposition Front Benchers have resigned since the current Leader of the Opposition came to power.

Sir Edward Davey

I was actually going to mention the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), who said in his speech that the motion might unite the Conservatives. It probably will, because a rafter of turkeys ain't gonna vote for Christmas, but the ultimate division is still there. That should worry people throughout the country, because this Government and the Conservative party are incapable of delivering Brexit, as they have shown over the last two and a half years.

The right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) was right: the Government must now reach across the aisles and talk to all parties. They must get Parliament to deliver in this policy area. If they are to succeed in doing that, they will do three things. Article 50 must be extended, no deal must be taken off the table, and the Government must make it clear that when a deal is agreed, it will be put to the British people with the option of remaining in the EU. That, I think, could produce consensus, could deliver, and could bring the House together.

At present, we hear the Conservatives blaming everyone but themselves. They blame the remainers, they blame the Opposition, and they blame the Governor of the Bank of England. Sometimes I think they are going to blame sunshine, moonlight, good times and the boogie. However, there is only one group to blame, and it is the Conservative party.

18:02:00

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con)

Many people ask me—and, I dare say, every Member of Parliament—“Why on earth would you go into politics?” They ask it particularly at times like this, but I know the answer, and I know the answer as a Conservative. I went into politics because I believe to my bones in social mobility. Let me make it crystal clear that I expect there are Members throughout the House who believe in that, but the issue that divides us is how to come up with solutions: how to go about achieving it, how to unlock potential, how to seek out the treasure that is in the heart of every man and woman.

I know that it is as a Conservative Member of Parliament that I have been able to provide opportunities in my community in Cheltenham that have allowed people to fulfil that potential. People say, “Cheltenham? For goodness' sake, it must be the most affluent place in the country.” Not a bit of it: we have some of the most deprived communities anywhere in the country, where people live in generational, entrenched poverty.

What has the Conservative party done for my community? It has provided £22 million for a cyber-park in Cheltenham which will allow the finest minds to come in and out of GCHQ, and to create start-ups. That means that if a person living nearby has come from generational poverty but something about them says, “I want to better myself, I want to go forward, I want to provide for my family and I want to build a future”, that opportunity exists. More than £400 million has been provided for a road project. Some might say, “Who cares about a road project?” Road projects are what allow a local community to thrive; they allow opportunities to be generated and futures created.

But it is not just about infrastructure projects. Recognising the issue of homelessness, it is this Government who provided £1.3 million for social impact bonds. That means there is one-on-one support for individuals who can go and address the needs of the most vulnerable in our society: those suffering from drug addiction, or mental health problems, or debt. That has served to make a huge difference in my community, so it is not just a stronger community economically, but a fairer one, too. Moreover, £3 million has been made available to help deliver social housing in Cheltenham, in Portland Place.

Of course there is always room for improvement and always more to do, but on the issue of social mobility which is the party that is not just talking the talk but walking the walk? It is this Government who are achieving that, and who are making a difference in my community, and that is why I will vote against this motion tonight.

18:05:00

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP)

Since I came into the House in 2001 I have seen a significant increase in the number of Members across the political divides who have spoken and voted in favour and defence of this United Kingdom. I and the people at home are eternally grateful for that, and I am sure that is shared across the divide.

I will be voting against the motion tonight, because I retain confidence in this Government on the terms and conditions contained in the confidence and supply agreement we entered into some time ago. But I want at this stage to offer a piece of critical advice to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. In the past year and a half her negotiations have not best served this United Kingdom, but the scale of last night’s defeat can offer her and us an opportunity for a revised position from her. She should go back to the EU and make it clear, which she has not done until now, that whenever they say, “A deal is only doable if it contains the backstop that we have arranged and agreed with you,” she will reply, “An agreement is doable, but not on the terms and conditions of that backstop, because it creates a division—a cleavage, a divorce—within our United Kingdom and we are not prepared to enter into any agreement that is based on that backstop.” It is only when she gets to that stage that we get Mr Juncker last night, after realising the scale of the defeat and what might emerge beyond last night’s defeat in subsequent weeks, making a statement that has not been commented on: that they, the EU, are determined to get a deal. He was not saying that six months ago or six weeks ago, but he is saying it now because the appearance of no deal on the horizon has suddenly galvanised the EU nation states, and our Prime Minister must take advantage of that now. She must say to the EU, “We are prepared to get a deal, but we are prepared to get a good deal and a reasonable deal”—not a one-way deal like the deal that fell last night, but a deal that delivers both for the UK and the EU. It is on that basis that I will be voting against the motion tonight.

18:08:00

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con)

I rise to speak because I believe this Government are the right Government to carry on with their serious work not just on Brexit, but so many other important issues affecting our daily lives, and because I believe a chain of events that might lead to a general election will in no way be good for the country, and because I am genuinely fearful of what might happen if this great country, but especially our businesses, should get into the hands of the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn); should he ever get hold of the tiller, this country will not be in safe hands. An election will certainly not solve the impending business at hand, which is delivering on our relationship with the EU.

I believe that this Government are the best Government to deliver for us, not just nationally but locally. That is what is really important to me, as the MP for Taunton Deane. Since the Conservatives have been in power in my constituency, we have delivered more than any other Government. There are more people in work there than ever before, and more small and medium-sized enterprises are being set up. There is more funding coming our way, thanks to the strong economy. That is why my calls for £79 million for new theatres in the hospitals were agreed to and accepted, and it is why we got an additional £11 million for more health services locally.

We have had more funding for infrastructure—£28 million—and we are upgrading the A358, the Toneway and the motorway junction. We got £7 million to enable a road through Staplegrove, where more housing is being built. We are building more housing than ever before in Taunton Deane, and that is because of the strong economy. There is a great deal going on. More children in Taunton Deane are getting a better education than ever before, and we are building a new special school. All these things are possible only because of the strong economy and because of our understanding of what business needs. We have cut Labour's astonishing deficit by four fifths, which has restored the public finances. Finally, it will not surprise people that I want to touch on the environment. This Government have an unparalleled record on working for the environment, and we must continue with that great work. That is another good reason why we need to leave the EU.

I am backing the Prime Minister. She will come up with a deal, and we must do this through compromise. We must work as a team on these Benches and we must listen to the other side, but we must pull off Brexit. I am confident that this Government, with their track record on the economy and all the other things they have delivered, including on the environment, are the right Government to do that successfully and fairly so that we leave future generations able to carry on the good work that we have set in place, to live in a fair and wonderful economy and to take this great nation into the future.

18:11:00

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

The famous phrase is that a fish rots from the head down. It is a recognition that bad leadership infects all that it touches, and what greater example of that could there be than this present Government? The rot is not confined to Downing Street; it is infecting the whole country. Not strong and stable, but stubborn and self-obsessed. Brexit is by far the clearest, but by no means the only, example. The Prime Minister has turned Brexit into a bizarre modern-day Schleswig-Holstein question. Palmerston claimed that question to be so complicated that only three people understood it: one was dead; one had been driven mad by it; and one had forgotten it altogether. The truth is, however, that this is not a complicated situation. It is the Prime Minister's red lines that have killed her deal; it is her red lines that have driven this Parliament mad; and it is her red lines that are now best forgotten.

This infectious failure has covered all the bases. This is a Government who cannot organise a tailback on the M20. They are presiding over a shortage of nurses while stockpiling fridges. They are alienating our EU citizen neighbours while deporting our Windrush families. They are a Government obsessed with what stickers are on the Speaker's wife's car while ignoring pleas for help with issues such as knife crime. The roll call goes on and on. Universal credit, homelessness, the cost of living, the refugees crying out for sanctuary, the human rights of the women of Northern Ireland—at every turn, this Government cannot get a grip, and those burning injustices burn harder as a result.

This country is divided, and this Parliament is divided. The deadlock is deepening, not dissolving, and the Prime Minister cannot even be bothered to pick up the phone. No party can continue to prevaricate while the far right grows stronger. That will not stop with Brexit, and Brexit does not deal with the crisis of confidence in our politics that we all now face. We are not the only country facing difficult choices or challenges, but we are the only country that thinks that, because we are the mother of all democracies, there is nothing wrong with how we approach things. Change has to come, for all our sakes, but for that to happen, it has to start at the top and we have to stop the rot.

18:14:00

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con)

I rise to speak on the behalf of not just Brenda from Bristol, but all the Brendas in Bexhill and Battle, who are probably thinking right now, “The last thing we want is a general election, but we want our Parliament and all our MPs to work better together to fix the issues of our day.” I have enjoyed this afternoon because I have had the opportunity to listen to many feelings, hopes and aspirations, but it depresses me that people would still rather shout at each other instead of reaching out, identifying issues that are common to us all and trying to fix them.

I am proud of the things that the Government have helped me deliver in my constituency since my election in 2015. All my secondary schools are now good or outstanding. Last Friday, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care spent time seeing how our health service is joined up with our social care team, and it made me proud to see amazing leaders working as one, which is a good example for Parliament.

Of course, I am not naive, and I recognise that the Opposition must oppose and that the Government must govern. I am also not so naive as to say that there are no big challenges in my constituency. For example, I will be setting up a taskforce on homelessness because I have noticed the streets in Bexhill getting worse. I have also noticed more casework from my constituents because services are not available at the levels they once were.

Many of the points made by Opposition Members are therefore correct. Equally, however, we now have more people in employment than ever before. Things cannot be as bad as Opposition Members say, but perhaps they are not as good as Government Members sometimes say. If we all took that attitude and worked out how to fix the things that really matter to people, we might also be able to fix the issues of Brexit.

I want to touch on something that I thought would have been fixed by now when I was elected in 2015—social care reform. It is within us in this House to fix things for the most vulnerable and elderly people in our communities. We agree on so much. The Opposition talk about a wealth tax, and the Conservative manifesto talked about people paying more. We are almost there, and yet our occasional hatred for each other stops us reaching out.

When it comes to reaching out, there is one thing that I would like my Government to do to show that they really are listening, and it relates to the £65 charge for EU citizens to maintain the same rights that they enjoyed before the referendum. That does not feel fair to me, and I speak to many Members on both sides of the Chamber who feel the same. If the Government are listening, they should reach out to every Member who agrees with me, be they leaver or remainer, and offer that olive branch. If we start doing things that way, perhaps people will appreciate that the Government are listening and perhaps then we will work better together in the manner that all our constituents expect.

18:17:00

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP)

I have no confidence in this Government and I have never have. I have no confidence because of how the Department for Work and Pensions treats people. I have no confidence because of the constituent who was sanctioned because they were visiting their dying father. I have no confidence because another constituent was sanctioned while waiting to start a job with the DWP. I have no confidence because of the way people on the personal independence payment are treated. I have no confidence because of how the two-child policy and the rape clause have been pursued against vulnerable women in our society: they must be scrapped. I have no confidence because of the closure of Glasgow's jobcentres.

I have no confidence in the Government because of the implementation of the hostile environment, with refugees having been left waiting and constituents unable to be with their families. I have no confidence because of the constituent who lost out on his wife's visa because he was £7 under the threshold. I have no confidence in the Government because of the good character test that is being applied to children, some of whom cannot get citizenship because the Government think they are not of good enough character. While speaking of good character, I have no confidence in the Government because the Home Office told my constituent that he could not get citizenship because he had volunteered with the Red Cross and that that was a sign of bad character. I have no confidence in the Government because of their pursuance of section 322(5) of the immigration rules, whereby people have lost out on leave to remain because they had made a legitimate change to their tax returns that the Government thought was somehow wrong.

I have no confidence in the Government because of their abject failure to deal with Scottish limited partnerships and to reform Companies House. It is almost as if they like money laundering in this country. I have no confidence in the Government because of their refusal, despite all the evidence, to allow Glasgow to pursue supervised drug consumption rooms. It is expected that drug deaths in Scotland will top 1,000 this coming year, but the Government refuse to act for illogical reasons, so I have absolutely no confidence in them.

I have no confidence in the Government because they fail to realise that young people deserve a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. They think that under-25s are not worth the same when they go out to work. This pretended living wage fails to give people the dignity in work that they deserve.

I have no confidence in the Government because of their failure to tackle the real and present danger that Brexit will cause to all our constituents. They have put their head in the sand and are refusing to accept that the single market and the customs union are the best way forward.

I do have confidence in the people of my constituency. I have confidence in the people of Glasgow and the people of Scotland who voted for independence with such hope in 2014, and I know that

when Scotland gets its chance again it will have no confidence in this Government and lots of confidence in itself.

18:20:00

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con)

I am sure that at some point in your life, Mr Speaker, it is possible that you have owned a copy of that famous political book “The Downing Street Years” by Margaret Thatcher. If so, given your memory, you may well recall its very first words: “Ayes, 311. Noes, 310.” That was the result of the no-confidence vote in 1979 that brought Margaret Thatcher to power. How would my colleagues feel if, as they browse in a bookstore a few years from now, they see a copy of “The Downing Street Years” by the Leader of the Opposition and the opening sentence is a narrow victory in a vote of no-confidence that led to a new era in British politics? We all know that new era would not be like the previous one to which I have referred.

That vote in 1979 ushered in an era in which free enterprise returned to the heart of British politics. We went through a difficult period of adjustment in our economy, which culminated in the end of socialism and the fall of the Berlin wall—the greatest victory in the history of modern conservatism. Such a vote tonight would bring in a different era and all of that would be turned back. There would be a return to nationalisation, command and control, the idea that the state knows best and confiscatory tax rates. Not education, education, education but regulation, regulation, regulation.

I am proud to speak from the Conservative Benches tonight. I became a Conservative after seeing what it was like in eastern Europe and because of my experience of the true face of that supposedly compassionate ideology. Those who turned a blind eye to it should be ashamed.

I started with Callaghan and I finish with Callahan—not the former Labour Prime Minister but Detective Inspector Harry Callahan of the San Francisco police department. To anyone who thinks it is a good idea for Labour to win the no-confidence vote tonight and then get into power, all I can say is, “I hope you’re feeling lucky.”

18:22:00

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab)

Some Conservative Members have been calling into question the motivations of the Opposition in calling this no-confidence vote. Let us be clear that yesterday’s vote was not just a defeat but a complete and utter rout. Some Members have talked about historical parallels but, if yesterday’s vote had been a battle, it would compare with the battle of Cannae, in which Hannibal annihilated the Roman army. It was a textbook defeat, just like last night was a textbook example of arrogance and hubris in government.

Last night’s vote aside, let me run through the myriad reasons why the Opposition and I have no confidence in the Government. In-work poverty is at 4 million people, and homelessness is soaring. Yesterday we learned in Norwich and Norfolk that 38 of our 53 children’s centres are being closed. Why? Because Norfolk County Council says that the Government’s cuts are forcing that to happen. It was a day of complete shame in my city. Without a hint of irony, the Government, while closing down our children’s centres, have declared Norwich an opportunity area as they attempt to improve failing social mobility. It is a policy akin to attempting to fill up a bath with no plug.

In education, schools face real-terms funding cuts. In *The Guardian* today Norfolk County Council, in the media again, is under fire from the local government ombudsman for failing to address concerns and look after children with special educational needs.

On mental health, after the Prime Minister personally promised to improve that Cinderella service, Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust has been put into special measures again—that makes three times in four years, which is a first for any trust in the country. In this day and age, real-terms funding is down by 13% but demand is up by 50%.

Let me deal with an issue that the House and, in particular, the Government have failed to adequately address: the impending climate catastrophe and biodiversity loss. Above all else, given the timescales we are talking about, this is a calamity waiting to happen, but the Government are comprehensively failing on it. Time after time we hear the greenwash from Conservative Members that they will do what it takes on the environment. They slashed solar subsidies, with 9,000 job losses; and fracking has been announced, put forward and is now actually happening, and not just in this country—they are also doing it in China, with taxpayers' money. The climate science tells us that we need to leave that gas in the ground—80% of it—and that this cannot happen. In the words of that legend of Norwich, Delia Smith, I say to those on the Government Benches, "Let's be 'avin' you. Let's have that general election. Let's have that vote. Support this motion."

18:25:00

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con)

There are moments in this Chamber for political knockabout, for consensus and for constructive debate, and I am very disappointed that when we have such a momentous decision to make about how we take forward our exit from the EU, we are having this debate today. I appreciate that yesterday's vote is a reason why it has been called, but this would have been made slightly better had the Leader of the Opposition been able to give a clear answer on his position on Brexit in the months and months in which he has been asked about it. All he has been able to do is say that he wants a general election, and he continues to say that. I sincerely hope that after this evening, when I believe he will lose this vote, he will move on and start giving some clarity on his position on Brexit. It is simply not fair to the country that the Opposition cannot put together their position, at this point in time, when I recognise that here in Parliament we need to come together and solve how we leave the EU.

That is what businesses, particularly in my constituency, are calling on us to do. They are asking us to get on with it. What I also hear from businesses more often than not is that their concern is not so much about the uncertainty of Brexit, but about what would happen if the Leader of the Opposition were to become Prime Minister. It is what would happen if his party and his hard-left version of Labour were to take charge of our economy and our country, because that would be the worst possible thing for our country. I would have no confidence, on behalf of my constituents, in what he and his Government would do for our economy, for our security or even for our public services. He may claim to be a champion of our public services, but not only would they be completely unsustainable and unfundable under his economic model, but I have no confidence that he would be able to improve their performance. We have done that in government, be that in schools, where children are now learning to read, which is fundamental to their having better opportunities in life, or in the NHS. As we heard last week, we now have a long-term plan for a sustainable national health service, and funded sustainably.

I look forward to our continuing to deliver on these commitments in government, but first we need to deliver Brexit. These are difficult times, not just in the UK, but for countries across the western

world. We need to come together, move forward, deliver on Brexit, continue making Britain a better place to live and build our place in the world outside the EU.

18:28:00

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab)

I rise in support of the Leader of the Opposition's motion. As a teacher and headteacher throughout my career, trust has always been important to me: the trust children had in me as their teacher, and the trust that teachers had in me as their headteacher, to understand their needs and make the right decisions on their behalf. Trust in relationships and in the workplace is crucial. Today's debate is not about whether the Prime Minister has the ability to make decisions on our behalf; it is about whether we trust her to understand the mood of the country, the zeitgeist, and the needs of every region and demographic, and make the right decisions. The Government have suffered the biggest parliamentary defeat in history, been found in contempt of Parliament, overseen the steepest rise in poverty, and averaged a resignation per month.

I trust the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Front-Bench team as people who understand the struggles that many in our country are facing. I trust them to have the compassion and intellect to understand and empathise with the people of this country, and to be able to make the decisions that will improve all our lives.

Is the Prime Minister a good public servant? Yes. Does she work hard? Yes. Do I respect her? Yes—I respect anyone who devotes their life to public service. But is the Prime Minister a diplomat? Does she show warmth and empathy? Is she able to negotiate with the other 27 countries in the EU, in our interests? Clearly not. I do not trust our Prime Minister to represent our country and negotiate a deal that is in the best interests of the people of Colne Valley—my constituents—or our country.

For me, this is not just about whether we are in the EU or not; it is about the kind of society that I want my granddaughter to live in. Just before Christmas, my five-year-old granddaughter came into Parliament for the first time, and she loved it. Fast forward 30 years to when she is a grown woman—do I want her to inherit the world determined by this Government? No, I do not. I wonder how she will judge the Government's handling of Brexit when she is a grown woman. I see it as a full-blown display of incompetence, focused purely on party interests, and as a failure to take strong action to protect jobs and the economy, workers' rights, environmental protections and national security.

I do not trust the Government with my constituents' future, my granddaughter's future or our country's future. I have, therefore, no confidence in the Government. I do trust a person like the Leader of the Opposition to understand diplomacy.

18:31:00

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con)

When I was elected, my constituents in Stoke-on-Trent South were clear: they voted overwhelmingly for Brexit and overwhelmingly in rejection of what the Labour party has become and now stands for. The Momentum-led Labour party does not represent predominantly working-class communities like mine in the midlands and the north. Years of Labour have done nothing to improve my city, Stoke-on-Trent—quite the reverse, with our local industries decimated and our local communities taking the brunt and being left behind.

Since Conservatives came to power, Stoke-on-Trent's industries have started to blossom again, with record numbers of people working, and the best place to start a new business is now Stoke-on-Trent. This success is thanks to the hard work of our businesses and our communities, yes, but most significantly it is thanks to the policies of Conservatives. We have seen a Government who have transformed our economy, from the ruins of Labour's crash to one of the most successful developed economies. Having supported local businesses to grow, invest and take on more people, we have seen more than 3.4 million more people in work, with unemployment at a record low; measures to keep taxes low; and the introduction of a national living wage. A basic-rate taxpayer is now more than £1,200 better off than they were in 2010—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker

Order. I know the House is excited, but the hon. Gentleman must get a respectful hearing.

Jack Brereton

Thank you, Mr Speaker.

We must continue to pursue measures that will help to address the cost of living, and we must focus on growing aspirations, creating better opportunities and improving job prospects for our communities. That would be threatened by a Labour Government led by the Leader of the Opposition. Labour's unfunded plans for £1 trillion of extra spending would see us racking up huge debts, and would mean massive tax rises for people in constituencies like mine who can least afford them. And for what? For ideologically motivated white elephants, nationalisation of our industries, and the raiding of the public purse to pursue policies that have been tried and have failed time and again, threatening jobs, our industries and our economic prosperity. Every time we have had a Labour Government, they have left our country with more people out of work than when they started.

As I have said many times before, my constituency, Stoke-on-Trent South, voted overwhelmingly to leave. At every opportunity, I have voted in this House to enact Brexit and deliver on the wishes of my constituents. For this House to go against what the British public and most of my constituents voted for would be a total betrayal of democracy, but that is what a significant proportion of MPs on the Opposition Benches want. They have repeatedly voted for measures to thwart Brexit, frustrating and trying to prevent or delay us from leaving on 29 March. This motion shows that the Labour leadership would rather play party politics than put the national interest and our country first. The Labour leader has been clear: they want a general election, going against the majority who are fed up with politicians and want us to get on with delivering for our country.

18:35:00

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

When I think of the confidence that I have in this Government, I think about how they have treated the most vulnerable people in our country. When I think of my constituents, I think of a 10-year-old boy who was orphaned when his mother died. Instead of nurturing him, trying to care for him and providing him with security, this Government threatened to deport him. That was a most shameful act and a disgrace, and it is typical of this Government's hostile environment policy. For that and many other reasons, I have no confidence in this Government. It is about how they have treated my constituents and many vulnerable people across this country. It is also about how they have handled this negotiation in such a feckless and dysfunctional manner. They could not agree ahead of time what their negotiating objectives were. There was no spirit of collaboration, even after the Prime Minister lost her majority in this place. There was no attempt on a collegial basis to agree negotiating objectives for this country and to deliver in the national interest of this country. That

was not achieved. Indeed, this Government have subverted democracy at every turn when it suited their interests, even though they do not command a majority of the popular consent of the people, or even a majority in this House of Commons.

Even though this is a hung Parliament, the Government have packed their Select Committees with Tory majorities by procedural sleight of hand. They repeatedly seek to circumvent or abuse the Sewel convention in their dealings with the devolved Administrations. Indeed, this Government became the first Administration in parliamentary history to be held in contempt of Parliament.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab)

Does my hon. Friend agree that, in Scotland, people will be watching this thinking it is an absolute shambles? The Government rode roughshod over us and we have no trust, no faith at all, in this Government. We need a general election now.

Mr Sweeney

Absolutely. We need a general election because there is no way to clear this impasse. There is a clear lack of faith in the Government and a clear lack of will from the Government to engage productively to reach out to build a national consensus to achieve the way forward. It is now the job of Parliament to take control. The only way to do that is to reset the clock, have a general election and allow a new mandate to be formed in the interests of delivering for the people of this country. That is the only way to do it. That is why I will be supporting the motion of the Leader of the Opposition tonight to bring down this failing Government and to deliver a mandate that will act in the national interest of this country.

Mr Speaker

Two minutes. I call Luke Graham.

18:37:00

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con)

I will try to keep my contribution very short. I rise tonight in support of the Government, mainly because I hear the frustrations of the people in this country. I hear them from my constituents and we hear them in this House. There is confusion on our split party position. We are criticised for the red lines, but all we hear from Labour are its blurred lines, its lack of clear direction and its inability to come forward with a constructive alternative to the Government's proposals.

Parties of all colours failed to make a constructive case for the United Kingdom's position in the European Union. Many contributions in this Chamber this afternoon have lamented that fact. Many of them have been driven by anger, which is fine; anger is an easy emotion and it is one that many of our constituents feel. However, when party politics fail and policies fall down, MPs need to step up. That is what we need to do in the coming weeks.

What has come from the defeat last night is a clear determination from my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to reach out across this Chamber, to come back with different proposals, and to listen to people from across the political spectrum—not those who turn up in this Chamber and say they work in the national interest, but only work in the nationalist interest, but those MPs who are here genuinely to serve their constituents and to protect and preserve our United Kingdom.

It is incredibly easy to criticise, but as Members of Parliament we cannot abdicate our responsibilities for what we were elected to do. Our constituents do not want another general election. They want us to get on with our jobs.

18:39:00

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab)

This has been a very passionately argued debate. At my count, 59 Members gave speeches, and they were not holding back. The scene was set by the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), who said that the Prime Minister must accept the verdict of the House last night. The necessity for that was underpinned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth), who highlighted the fact that she is a Prime Minister with no majority and no authority. That is perhaps why the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) talked about the Prime Minister's record lack of humility and the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable), in what I thought was a soulful speech, spoke of the Government's arrogant approach to these negotiations. Why is that so important? Because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) said, the UK is more divided and fearful for the future than ever before.

We have had some comic moments in this debate. I was particularly amused by the contribution of the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman); his "Life of Brian" speech—an homage to one of the greatest satirical farces in British film history—was very appropriate for the times we are in. The hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) also talked about the Conservative party re-bonding in the Lobby tonight.

I cannot fail to note the passionate and sometimes breathless critiques of the last nine years of austerity economics by colleagues on the Opposition Benches, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), for Warrington North (Helen Jones) and for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy). And a special prize must go to the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood), who at very short notice gave a four-minute speech in three minutes by speaking 25% faster.

As the Prime Minister said in this debate, this is a

“crucial moment in our nation's history”,

but it is an unenviable task to summarise this debate today and to ask Members of this House to pass judgment on her stewardship of our country. First, let me say very clearly that I am not one of those people who questions her motives. I agree with the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), who said that she was motivated by public duty. I do not doubt that she has sincerely attempted to fulfil the task given to us by the voters in this referendum. I have no doubt too that she has tried her best and given it her all. But she has failed, and I am afraid the failure is hers and hers alone. I am certain that every Member of this House admires her resilience. To suffer the humiliations on a global stage that she has done would have finished off weaker people far sooner. Yet the reality is that, if the Prime Minister really sat down and thought carefully about the implications for our country of last night's defeat, she would have resigned.

Throughout history, Prime Ministers have tried their best and failed. There is no disgrace in that—that's politics. But this Prime Minister has chosen one last act of defiance, not just defying the laws of politics, but defying the laws of mathematics. It was Disraeli who said:

“A majority is always better than the best repartee.”

The Prime Minister is without a majority for a flagship policy, with no authority and no plan B.

The result last night was 432 to 202. That is not a mere flesh wound. No one doubts her determination, which is generally an admirable quality, but misapplied it can be toxic. The cruellest truth of all is that she does not possess the necessary skills—the political skills, the empathy, the ability and, most crucially, the policy—to lead this country any longer.

I know that there are many good people in the Government, and they will be examining their consciences as the clock runs down on these Brexit negotiations. Because the Prime Minister has refused to resign, we now face a choice between a general election to sort out this mess or continued paralysis under her leadership. But now the ante has been raised. The Government have been defeated on a Brexit plan that has been their sole reason for existing for the past two and a half years. They have not just been defeated on the most crucial issue facing our country; they have suffered the worst defeat of any British Government in history. The clock is ticking. MPs have shown that they are ready to take back control over what has been, from start to finish, a failed Brexit process. The question facing the House tonight is whether it is worth giving this failed Prime Minister another chance to go back pleading to Brussels, another opportunity to humiliate the United Kingdom and another few weeks to waste precious time. Our answer tonight must be a resounding no.

Let me remind the House why. It was this Prime Minister who chose to lay down red lines that never commanded the support of Parliament. It was this Prime Minister who refused to guarantee the rights of EU nationals who have made their lives and their homes in this country. It was this Prime Minister who time and again tried to shut Parliament out, refusing to give us a meaningful vote and refusing to release the legal advice on the deal. She has treated this place and Members on both sides of it with utter disdain.

The right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) said:

“the road to tyranny is paved with Executives ignoring Parliament.”—[Official Report, 19 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 1009.]

That is what the Prime Minister has done, and so Parliament is having to assert its rightful authority. At every turn, she has chosen division over unity. She has not tried to bring the 17 million people who voted leave and the 16 million people who voted remain together. She should have tried to assure those who voted remain. Instead, she chose to placate the most extreme of her colleagues on the leave side of the debate. That has left the nation more divided than it was in June 2016.

Out on the streets, in homes, schools and hospitals, people are struggling, and they take no hope and no strength from this ailing Government. What happened to those burning injustices that the Prime Minister said it was her mission to fight when she came into office? Racism, classism, homelessness and insecure jobs have all grown and burned brighter than ever before, and for so much of this, she is responsible. If the House declares tonight that it has no confidence in the Government, it will open the possibility of a general election and a decisive change in direction for our country on Brexit and for workers, young people and our vital services.

The Prime Minister will forever be known as the “nothing has changed” Prime Minister, but something must change. Our only choice left is to change her and her Government in a general election. We know that she has worked hard, but the truth is that she is too set in her ways and too aloof to lead. She lacks the imagination and agility to bring people with her, and she lacks the authority on the world stage to negotiate this deal. Ultimately, she has failed. It is not through lack of effort or dedication, and I think the country recognises that effort. In fact, the country feels

genuinely sorry for the Prime Minister—I feel sorry for her—but she cannot confuse pity for political legitimacy or sympathy for sustainable support. The evidence is clear.

I know that Government Members will want to support the Prime Minister in the vote this evening out of loyalty to the party, but everyone in this Chamber, no matter which Lobby they go through, knows in their heart that this Prime Minister is not capable of getting a deal through. Government Members know it. They know that we know they know it, and the country knows it. That is why we must act. That is why we need something new. That is why we need a general election. I commend this motion to the House.

18:49:00

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove)

As you know, Mr Speaker, having sat throughout this entire debate, it has been a passionate debate, characterised by many excellent speeches. I commend my hon. Friends the Members for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), for Bolton West (Chris Green), for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah), for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), and for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), and my hon. Friends the Members for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), for Dudley South (Mike Wood), for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) and for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on my side for a series of outstanding speeches.

It has also been the case, as the shadow Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson), pointed out, that there have been many powerful speeches from the Opposition Benches as well. I, like him, want to pay particular tribute to the hon. Members for Warrington North (Helen Jones), for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) and for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) for moving and passionate speeches. Their constituencies are lucky to have them as advocates for their concerns and their needs.

However, perhaps the bravest and finest speech that came from the Opposition Benches was given by the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock). It takes courage—and he has it, having been elected on a Labour mandate and representing working class people—to say that the leader of the party that he joined as a boy is not fit to be Prime Minister. He speaks for his constituents, and he speaks for the country.

That takes me to the speech from the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for West Bromwich East. He spoke well, but I felt he did not rise to the level of events. One thing that was characteristic of his speech is that he did not once mention in his speech the Leader of the Opposition or why he should be Prime Minister. I have a lot of time for the hon. Gentleman, and we have several things in common: we have both lost weight recently—him much more so; we are both friends of Israel—him much more so; and we both recognise that the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) is about the worst possible person to lead the Labour party—him much more so.

As well as great speeches from the Back Benches, we had some interesting speeches from the Front Benches. We had a speech of over 20 minutes from my great friend, the leader of the Scottish National party in this place, the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford). Again, however, in those 20 minutes he did not once mention the common fisheries policy. I think everyone in Scotland who recognises the potential to free ourselves from the common fisheries policy that Brexit provides will note that, in 20 minutes of precious parliamentary time, the SNP did

not mention them, is not interested in them and, as far as the fishing people of Scotland are concerned, literally has nothing to say.

I must now turn to the speech from the leader of the Liberal Democrats, the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable)—someone for whom I also have affection and respect. He made a number of good points, but he also said that he regretted the referendum. This from a party that was the first in this House to say that we should have a referendum on EU membership. Because he does not like the result of the last referendum, he now wants another referendum. The Liberal Democrat policy on referendums is not the policy of Gladstone or Lloyd George; it is the policy of Vicky Pollard—“No, but yeah, but no, but yeah”.

I should also commend the speech given by the leader of the Democratic Unionist party in this place, the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds). He explained that he had been inundated with text messages today from people in this House saying, “Please, please, please back the Government tonight”—and some of those text messages had even come from Conservatives.

Critically, when we think about confidence in this country and in this Government, I think a daily vote in confidence is being executed by the individuals investing in this country, creating jobs and opportunity for all our citizens. Under this Government, this country remains the most successful country for foreign direct investment of any country in Europe, with more than £1,300 billion being invested in the past year. That is why Forbes Magazine says that this country is the best destination in the world for new jobs. It is why the independent organisation JLL says that the best place in the world for the future of services is here in the United Kingdom. It is why, once again, London has been recorded by independent inspectors as the best place in the world for tech investment. We see that when the Spanish rail firm Talgo shortlists six destinations for investment in new rolling stock, and all six are in the United Kingdom; when Boeing opens a new factory in Sheffield to create jobs for British workers; when Chanel moves from France to London to establish a new corporate headquarters, and when Starbucks moves from Amsterdam to London to ensure more investment and jobs. The Opposition should wake up and smell the coffee. All of this—in the words of the BBC—despite Brexit.

That investment—those jobs that have been created under my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister’s inspirational leadership—has been made in public services and social justice. As we heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Dudley South (Mike Wood) and for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), there are 1.9 million more children in good and outstanding schools. It is also the case that the gap between the poorest and the richest in our schools has narrowed under this Conservative Government. We have a record level of investment in the NHS and, thanks to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, a 10-year plan and £20 billion of investment—£394 million extra every week—for our NHS.

We also invest in our national security. We meet the 2% target for investment in NATO and we have two new aircraft carriers, which are capable of projecting British force and influence across the world in defence of freedom and democracy. In contrast, while we are standing up for national security, what about the right hon. Member for Islington North? He wants to leave NATO. He wants to get rid of our nuclear deterrent. He said recently in a speech, “Why do countries boast about the size of their armies? That is quite wrong. Why don’t we emulate Costa Rica, which has no army at all?” No allies, no deterrent, no army—no way can this country ever allow that man to be our Prime Minister and in charge of our national security.

If the Leader of the Opposition cannot support our fighting men and women, who does he support? Who does he stand beside? It was fascinating to discover that he was there when a wreath was laid

to commemorate those who were involved in the massacre of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics. He says he was present but not involved. “Present but not involved” sums him up when it comes to national security. When this House voted to bomb the fascists of ISIS after an inspirational speech by the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), 66 Labour Members, including the hon. Member for West Bromwich East, voted with this Government to defeat fascism. I am afraid the Leader of the Opposition was not with us. In fighting fascism, he was present but not involved.

Similarly, when this House voted to take the action necessary when Vladimir Putin executed an act of terrorism on our soil, many good Labour Members stood up to support what we were doing, but not the Leader of the Opposition. When we were fighting Vladimir Putin—

Danielle Rowley

On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker

I hope it is a genuine point of order.

Danielle Rowley

The motion is about the Government. How is this relevant? Is this not dangerous?

Mr Speaker

If the Secretary of State were out of order, I would have said so. I did not because he is not.

Michael Gove

Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

If the Leader of the Opposition will not stand up against Putin when he attacks people in this country, if he will not stand up against fascists when they are running riot in Syria, if he will not stand up for this country when the critical national security questions are being asked, how can we possibly expect him to stand up for us in European negotiations? Will he stand up for us against Spain over Gibraltar? Will he stand up against the Commission to ensure that we get a good deal? Of course he will not, because he will not even stand up for his own Members of Parliament.

Why is it that a Labour Member of Parliament needs armed protection at her own party conference? Why is it that nearly half of female Labour MPs wrote to the Leader of the Opposition to say that he was not standing up against the vilification and the abuse that they received online which had been carried out in his name? If he cannot protect his own Members of Parliament, if he cannot protect the proud traditions of the Labour party, how can he possibly protect this country? We cannot have confidence in him to lead. We have confidence in this Government, which is why I recommend that the House votes against the motion.

19:00:00

Debate interrupted (Order, this day).

Question put.

Division 296

16/01/2019 19:00:00

The House divided:

Ayes: 306

Noes: 325

Question accordingly negatived.

The Prime Minister

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am pleased that the House has expressed its confidence in the Government tonight. I do not take this responsibility lightly, and my Government will continue their work to increase our prosperity, guarantee our security and strengthen our Union—and yes, we will also continue to work to deliver on the solemn promise that we made to the people of this country to deliver on the result of the referendum and leave the European Union.

I believe that this duty is shared by every Member of this House. We have a responsibility to identify a way forward that can secure the backing of the House, and to that end I have proposed a series of meetings between senior parliamentarians and representatives of the Government over the coming days. I should like to invite the leaders of parliamentary parties to meet me individually, and I should like to start those meetings tonight. The Government approach the meetings in a constructive spirit, and I urge others to do the same, but we must find solutions that are negotiable and command sufficient support in the House. As I have said, we will return to the House on Monday to table an amendable motion and to make a statement about the way forward.

The House has put its confidence in this Government. I stand ready to work with any Member of the House to deliver on Brexit, and to ensure that this House retains the confidence of the British people.

Mr Speaker

I call Jeremy Corbyn.

Jeremy Corbyn

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last night the House rejected the Government's conclusion of its negotiations with the European Union—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker

Order. I called the Prime Minister on a point of order, and the Prime Minister was heard. She was heard in relative tranquillity, and certainly with courtesy. The same courtesy will be extended to the Leader of the Opposition, and to others who seek to raise points of order. That is the way it is.

Jeremy Corbyn

Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Last night the House rejected the Government's deal emphatically. A week ago, the House voted to condemn the idea of a no-deal Brexit. Before there can be any positive discussions about the way forward, the Government must remove, clearly and once and for all, the prospect of the catastrophe of a no-deal Brexit from the EU, and all the chaos that would come as a result of that. I invite the Prime Minister to confirm now that the Government will not countenance a no-deal Brexit from the European Union.

Ian Blackford

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I must say that I welcome the offer of talks from the Prime Minister. It is important that all of us recognise the responsibility that we have, and, on the back of the defeat of the Government's motion last night, that we have to work together where we can to find a way forward. I commit the Scottish National party to working constructively with the

Government. However, it is important in that regard that we make it clear to the Prime Minister, in the spirit of openness in these talks, that the issue of extending article 50, of a people's vote and avoiding a no deal have to be on the table. We have to agree to enter these talks on the basis that we can move forward and achieve a result that will unify all the nations of the United Kingdom.

Mr Speaker

Thank you.

Sir Edward Davey

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. From the Liberal Democrats position, we are clear that we want to engage in talks with Her Majesty's Government, but it is important that the Government make clear that no deal is not an option. It is very important that the Prime Minister does not—as, to be fair to her, earlier today she did not—rule out extending article 50; it is important that the House has that chance to think and come together. Finally, I ask the Prime Minister to ensure that this House gets a chance to take control of our own business as we go through the next few days and weeks.

Mr Speaker

Thank you.

Nigel Dodds

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The result of the motion of no confidence tonight illustrates the importance of the confidence and supply arrangement currently in place between—[Interruption.] I am always delighted when our opponents illustrate the strength of that relationship and what it is delivering for Northern Ireland; and when the people of Northern Ireland see that investment in education and health and infrastructure they will thank this Parliament and this party and this Government for that extra investment. [Interruption.] May I say this—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker

Order. Mr Stone, that is very unseemly behaviour. Normally you behave with great dignity in this place; calm yourself, man—get a grip.

Nigel Dodds

May I say, however, that the confidence and supply arrangement is of course built upon delivering Brexit on the basis of our shared priorities, and for us that is the Union, and we want to deliver Brexit, taking back control of our laws, our borders and our money, and leave the European Union as one country? Let us work in the coming days to achieve that objective.

Mr Speaker

Thank you.

Mr Carmichael

rose—

Mr Speaker

If the right hon. Gentleman really feels he must make a point of order then he may, although he has been represented by his right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey). [Interruption.] No, out of generosity of spirit.

Mr Carmichael

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I thank the Prime Minister for her assurance that the motion that will be brought on Monday will be amendable, and may I seek your guidance, Mr Speaker, about

how we on this side of the House, and indeed on the Conservative Benches as well, who want to see this matter put to a people's vote might on Monday be given the opportunity to do so, including the opportunity given to the Leader of the Opposition now that we know there is not to be a general election?

Mr Speaker

My response to the right hon. Gentleman, apart from thanking him for his point of order, is to say that if there is an amendable motion of which the Prime Minister, on behalf of the Government, has given notice, manifestly there will be an opportunity for people to table amendments, and we shall have then to see what happens. The right hon. Gentleman would not expect me to make a commitment in advance, but I know what he thinks and I have heard what he said.

We come now to the Adjournment—[Interruption.] Order. If hon. Members do not wish to hear the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) dilate on the matter of car production in Solihull, which seems an unaccountable choice on their part, I hope that they will leave the Chamber quickly and quietly so that the occupant of the Chair can hear the hon. Gentleman deliver his oration. [Interruption.] Order. We come now to the Adjournment, when I can divert the Whip from the attention of his hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries), who is whispering into his ear, no doubt extremely meaningfully.