

HOUSE OF COMMONS HANSARD

European Union (Withdrawal) Act

18 December 2018

EU Withdrawal Agreement

Emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

14:09:00

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

I beg to move,

That this House has considered the outcome of the Prime Minister's recent discussions with the European Commission and European Heads of Government regarding the Withdrawal Agreement, and potential ways forward.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con)

Go back to Skye.

Ian Blackford

Well, there we are. I do not know whether that was picked up by the microphone, but "Go back to Skye," has just been chuntered from a sedentary position. There is the message to the people of Scotland from the Conservative Benches, and the people of Scotland will reflect on the ignorance and arrogance shown by so-called hon. Members. Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this debate on this specific and important matter. Not I nor anybody else will be going back to the Isle of Skye, because we will be in this place standing up for our constituents.

I recognise that the Prime Minister made a statement to the House yesterday, but this matter requires further discussion and examination. It is disappointing in the least that the Prime Minister is not here to listen and to respond to this debate. This debate has been won by the leader of the third party in the House of Commons. Where is the respect from the Prime Minister? Why is the Prime Minister not in her place to defend the inaction of her Government? It is an outrage that the Prime Minister does not have the gall to come to this House to debate such important matters. It is an insult to the people of Scotland and to the people of this House.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP)

Will the public not find it strange that the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has been asked to come here to talk about a Council meeting that he did not even attend?

Ian Blackford

My hon. Friend is correct. We have to understand the seriousness of the situation. The entire United Kingdom runs the risk of crashing out of the European Union on the basis that the Prime Minister

and the Government are trying to deny this House the opportunity to have a vote. Given that we have secured this timely debate, it is vital that the Prime Minister recognises the importance of being here and ensuring that she can respond.

We are in uncharted territory. The Government were found in contempt of Parliament, and the Prime Minister faces weekly resignations, barely surviving a vote of confidence from her own party. She is still in office but not in control. Perhaps more troubling, we are three months away from leaving the European Union and we are sleepwalking towards disaster. There is no majority for the Prime Minister's deal. We know that today the Cabinet was discussing a no-deal scenario—which very few would support—yet with the Prime Minister deferring a meaningful vote to the middle of January and the process of determining our future having to be agreed by 21 January, we run the risk of crashing out of the EU almost by accident. Having a meaningful vote on 14 January, with only a week thereafter for this House to agree an alternative, is playing with fire.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con)

The right hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech, which started off with great heat. If he wants to protect Scotland and protect constituencies that are concerned with business, such as mine, he should vote for this deal. Is he not trying to drive us over the edge? Is it not the Scottish Government who want to see us driven over the edge with no deal?

Ian Blackford

The hon. Gentleman should reflect on the fact that the Scottish National party, the Labour party, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens in the Scottish Parliament voted to ensure that Scotland's voice is heard. The determination of the people of Scotland was clear that we want to be in the European Union, but we have deaf ears from the hon. Gentleman, who fails and refuses to stand up for the people of Scotland. That is the reality.

Ian Blackford

I am going to make some progress.

Our constituents will not thank us for putting the UK in such a situation that we have one week from voting down the Prime Minister's deal to save the UK from a no-deal scenario. That is why we need this debate today. More importantly, however, we need a meaningful vote this week, not in the middle of January. The Prime Minister is playing a dangerous game of trying to lock us out of any alternative and make it a binary choice between her deal or no deal. It is the height of irresponsibility, treating this place and the electorate with contempt.

We must be honest with ourselves and, more importantly, with the public. There is no such thing as a good Brexit. The Government's analysis shows that we will be better off staying in the European Union compared with any of the Brexit options. Put simply, we are risking growth, job opportunities and prosperity, but why? We are told by the Prime Minister that it is because we must respect the referendum result. Well, when the facts change, our opinions can also change. We must be straight with those who voted leave or remain that we now know that there is a price to be paid for Brexit, such as job losses. Putting people on the dole is not a price worth paying. No Government worthy of that name are fit for purpose if they countenance such a scenario. It is an abrogation of responsibility.

We know that billions are being spent on no-deal planning. That money could have been spent on the NHS, on education, on transport and so on, but it is having to be spent on no-deal planning. What a waste it is that the Government think that that is appropriate. Money that should be spent on the frontline is being spent elsewhere because of the dogma of right-wing Brexit.

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

Is it not a very real possibility that the Prime Minister is pulling the wool over her Back Benchers' eyes? They know that she is running down the clock, and they think that she may be going to no deal, but a catalogue of people in her party and her Government have described no deal as a catastrophe. What is going to happen is that she will look down the barrel of no deal and then end up revoking article 50, and there will be hell on the Tory Benches when she does.

Ian Blackford

We are trying to ensure that we have a meaningful vote this week to ensure that this House votes down both the Prime Minister's plan and no deal. We can then move on to the alternatives and the solutions. The fact that the Prime Minister is risking catastrophe is unacceptable.

Ian Blackford

I will make a bit of progress and then take interventions later.

Many of us have been given briefings on Privy Council terms on the immediate impact of no deal. I am not allowed to share the details with the House, although I will say that the information that was shared with me should now be made public. It is sobering. The first job of any Government is to protect the interests of their people. This Government are wilfully exposing their citizens to risk, whether on job security, the procurement of medicines or food supply, or on aircraft being able to take off. It saddens me that I point the finger of blame fairly and squarely at this Government and at the Prime Minister.

We must wake up to the impact of Brexit and to the options that are in front of us. Some MPs, working on a cross-party basis, want to break the logjam. The SNP has been working with the Liberals Democrats, Plaid Cymru and the Greens, and I commend them for their desire to work on a cross-party basis. Members from the Labour party and, indeed, the Conservative party have also spoken out to support a people's vote. I know that there are many others in the Labour party and the Conservatives who want a people's vote. I understand party loyalty, but the issue today is one of loyalty to the electorate and to the individual nations that make up the United Kingdom. Now is the time to stand up and be counted. This is a constitutional crisis, and each and every one of us has an individual responsibility. Parliament will not be forgiven by many of our young people if we allow the greatest example of economic self-harm in modern times to take place.

Turning to the Leader of the Opposition, I do this from a position of sorrow, because I believe him to be a man of great principle, but I must say to him that he has become the midwife for Brexit. The Leader of the Opposition is letting the Government off the hook. He has it within his gift to bring forward a no confidence motion that will test the will of the House but, crucially, it will also allow his party to move on to the issue of a people's vote. Yesterday's stunt was an embarrassment. The Scottish National party and others sought to amend his motion, and today I ask him to do what he failed spectacularly to do yesterday and table a motion of no confidence in the Government. Let us move on and have that debate tomorrow.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab)

The Labour party has made it clear that we will table a motion of no confidence in the Government when we think we have the best opportunity of winning that vote. However, does the right hon. Gentleman agree it is a crying shame that the Prime Minister has chosen always to operate these negotiations in the best interest of the Conservative party? If she had considered the national interest, perhaps we would not be in the current mess.

Ian Blackford

I agree with the hon. Lady on that last point. She knows I have respect for her but, on the basis of the risks we all face, we have a responsibility to come together. I have spoken about the support we have had in working together with the Liberal Democrats, the Greens and Plaid Cymru, and I plead with the Labour party to work with us, too. We have to unite, because it is in the interest of all our nations to do so.

We need to bring forward a motion of no confidence in the Government because of the conditions the Labour party has laid down; we need to see whether we could trigger a general election. We need to test the will of the House on that issue and, on that basis, we would then be in a position to move forward. I simply say to the Leader of the Opposition that, based on the very real risk that there will be no deal as a consequence of the stupidity of what has come from the Government, we now have that responsibility, and today is the day—not tomorrow, and not when we came back in January—when the Opposition must unite in tabling a motion of no confidence in the Government.

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

Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford

I will give way one more time.

Geraint Davies

In that spirit of solidarity, will the right hon. Gentleman join the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) in supporting my European Union (Revocation of Notification of Withdrawal) Bill? The Bill would basically rule out any possibility of a no-deal Brexit and would require any deal to be agreed by this House and by a vote of the people, or else we stay in the EU by revoking article 50.

Ian Blackford

The hon. Gentleman is to be commended for his actions and, of course, we made it very clear that we supported the amendment of the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), which would have ruled out no deal. We are engaged in a process that we all want to go through, and it is important that the legal action taken by a number of Scottish parliamentarians, on a cross-party basis, has got us to a position where we know we can revoke article 50. Indeed, that may be what has to happen, but we have to get to a situation where the House is given an opportunity to vote for a people's vote first. In that scenario, the revocation of article 50 may well have to happen.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con)

I thank the right hon. Gentleman for knowing parliamentary procedure and for calling for the motion to be tabled correctly. I have been calling for the Labour party to grow up and table the motion with which it keeps threatening us.

I take the right hon. Gentleman back to the people's vote, about which I have a sincere question. He is unhappy with the outcome of the Scottish independence referendum and with the outcome of the 2016 referendum. Why would he accept the outcome of a people's vote any more than he has accepted the other two?

Ian Blackford

I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention, because it allows me to say that, when we had our referendum in 2014, we produced an 800-odd page White Paper. The people of Scotland knew exactly what our vision was for an independent Scotland. Crucially, in 2016 we had a slogan on the

side of a bus. We had a ridiculous situation in which people were not told the truth about what the impact of Brexit would be.

Way back in 2014, the people of Scotland were told that, if we stayed in the United Kingdom, Scotland would remain a member of the European Union and our rights as European citizens would be respected. In the 2016 referendum the people of Scotland voted to remain by 62%, and we were told that if we stayed in the United Kingdom, we would lead the UK and we would be respected as a partner in the United Kingdom.

What do we find? We do not find that we are leading the UK; we find that the UK is taking us out of the European Union against our will. The Scottish National party will not sit back and allow the people of Scotland to be dragged out of the European Union against their will. Scotland is a European nation, and we will remain a European nation.

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

My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech and painting a very bleak picture of the mess the UK is getting itself into. Under normal circumstances, the Prime Minister would be long gone by now. Given that no one else wants the job, not even the flip-flopping, Brexit-enabling Leader of the Opposition, does my right hon. Friend agree that Scotland's future lies squarely as an independent country and an equal partner within the European Union?

Ian Blackford

Of course, the First Minister of Scotland has said that we will work constructively across parties to try to save the UK from Brexit. We have made it clear that we wish to stay in the European Union but, when we get to the end of the process, if there is an economic threat to jobs and prosperity in Scotland, among other things, it is clear that the Scottish Parliament has a mandate to call an independence referendum. There is a majority in the Scottish Parliament to hold such a referendum.

Just a few months ago, this House voted to accept the claim of right for Scotland. If the Scottish Parliament comes forward with a request for a section 30 authority, this House must allow the people of Scotland to determine their own future.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD)

Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford

I want to make progress. I will take interventions later.

Here we have a Parliament in London that is silenced by the Government, and the devolved Administrations are silenced and ignored. The magnitude and seriousness of the challenge before us cannot be overestimated. The House will go into recess this week, and we cannot allow this farce to continue over the Christmas period. The Prime Minister has returned from Brussels with nothing. She has been humiliated, told by the European Union that there is no new negotiation, yet she continues to bury her head in the sand, hoping that the squeeze of time—the threat and the pressure of no deal—will get her blindfold Brexit over the line. It will not. This Government should hold the meaningful vote now. They should put the options on the table now or stand aside and let the people decide.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con)

I very much agree with the right hon. Gentleman's proposal for the vote coming back immediately. Of course, the various options open to us could then be voted on in a meaningful way. In that event,

would he and his party vote for Norway-plus? I know he has argued for that, as indeed have I, and it would mean the single market and the customs union. Or does he take the view that that boat has set sail?

Ian Blackford

The right hon. Lady makes a useful intervention. The position of the Scottish National party has always been that the people of Scotland voted to remain, and we wish that to be respected. The people's vote would create a circumstance in which we could at least test the will of the people of the United Kingdom. We have sought to compromise over the past two and a half years, and she is correct that we said Norway-plus is the minimum we would accept, but I believe that ship has now sailed. We ought to be staying in the European Union. That is the best option, and we should put it to the people. I am grateful that she also takes that view.

Ian Blackford

I need to make progress. I am aware that many other Members wish to speak, and I wish to move on.

Yesterday the Prime Minister told us that we will get our meaningful vote but that we will get it in the second week of January. That is not acceptable. Do this Government recognise that, with every week that passes, more and more uncertainty sets in? We hear day after day of companies putting off investment decisions, and it is the uncertainty and chaos of this Government that is leading to that. Businesses, farmers and workers are all left waiting on this Government. Delaying the vote is a total abdication of responsibility, causing even greater uncertainty and instability. Yet again, the fate of our services and our economy is left to play second fiddle to the internal struggles of the Tory Party. The truth is that this Prime Minister is hamstrung by her own party. The result of the recent confidence vote was little more than a pyrrhic victory for the Prime Minister. At a crucial time in its history, the UK has a lame-duck Prime Minister, saddled with a lame-duck Brexit deal. The Prime Minister cannot and must not use this result to support her claim that the choice is now between her bad Brexit and a catastrophic no-deal Brexit. The Prime Minister will have to face up to the fact that her deal carries no majority in the House of Commons. She must break the deadlock, and the SNP will support any second EU referendum that has remain as an option. Still struggling to cobble together support for her disastrous deal, the Prime Minister is seeking to run down the clock rather than act in all our national interests. We, as parliamentarians, cannot let that happen. We must ensure that the voices of our citizens are heard.

The Prime Minister's deal must be defeated. No one with the interests of this and future generations at heart could possibly accept it. This deal will take Scotland out of the EU against our will and remove us from the European single market of 500 million people. It will take us out of the customs union and the benefits of EU trade deals with more than 40 countries across the globe. This deal will make us poorer than staying in the European Union. [Interruption.] I can see the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), shaking his head, but he should look at his own economic analysis, as every shred of evidence shows that we are going to be poorer with Brexit than we would be if we stayed in. If he has not even read it and if he does not understand what it is in it, heaven help us. A no-deal Brexit is going to cost each person in Scotland £1,600 by 2030, compared with continued EU membership.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con)

The right hon. Gentleman is on the subject of economic analysis, so let me draw his attention to page 63 of the economic analysis supplied by the Government, which clearly shows that under the Prime Minister's deal there is zero impact on economic growth for Scotland. Surely if he wants to stand up for Scotland, he would do it by backing this deal.

Ian Blackford

I am afraid to say that the hon. Gentleman is mistaken, because the analysis he is referring to looks at the Chequers proposal and does not look at the Government's deal. He is wholly wrong and he needs to go back to school and do his homework.

The Government's Brexit deal will damage our NHS in Scotland, and make it harder to attract and retain the social care and health service staff we need. It will sell out our fishermen and put us at a competitive disadvantage with Northern Ireland—and the Prime Minister knows it. That is why our voice must be heard; this House should vote this week—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing)
Order. Very good.

Ian Blackford

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. As I was saying, that is why our voice must be heard. This House should vote this week before the recess.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)

Is my right hon. Friend aware that during last night's Fisheries Bill Committee sitting an amendment proposed setting an end date of 31 December 2020 for leaving the common fisheries policy, and the Tories voted it down? That is their real commitment to the fishermen.

Ian Blackford

I am not surprised, because the Conservatives have form: when Ted Heath took us into the European Union, he sold out Scotland's fishermen and every Tory Administration since have done exactly the same—and, guess what, they are still selling out Scotland's fishermen.

Running down the clock to threaten a no-deal Brexit is neither acceptable nor realistic. There is no majority in this House for such an outcome. It is crucial that a no-deal Brexit and the Prime Minister's deal are ruled out now. The Government must start listening to the Scottish Parliament, stop wasting time on their deal, which is going to be rejected, and pursue a better way forward. The SNP is clear that that means there should be an extension to the article 50 process, and we will join those from other parties in trying to secure such an extension.

We have always argued that the best option is to retain EU membership. We support a second EU referendum. Failing that—the best option of continued EU membership—we must stay in the single market and the customs union. I repeat that there are options that this Government are ducking and diving. [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker

Order. I would like to hear the right hon. Gentleman, even if nobody else does. I want to hear what he is saying, and he will be treated with the courtesy due to the leader of a party in this place.

Ian Blackford

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am most grateful for that. Obviously, I have taken a number of interventions and I may take one or two more, but I am conscious that many people wish to speak in this debate. I have a number of remarks I wish to make—

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab)

Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford

I will give way in a little while.

The recent European Court of Justice judgment provides clarity at an essential point in the UK's decision making over its future relationship with the EU. It exposes as false the idea that the only choice is between a bad deal negotiated by the Government or the disaster of no deal; remaining in the EU is still on the table, and the Prime Minister cannot insinuate otherwise. We, as Opposition parties, cannot allow the Government to kick the can down the road and we cannot allow them to run down the clock. I repeat: this is not a binary choice of this deal or no deal—there are other ways forward. The Prime Minister is simply scaremongering, trying to prevent a second EU referendum. This Government claim to want to fulfil the will of the people, yet they deny the people of the United Kingdom a say. This is a democracy, not a dictatorship. After two years of chaos, people have the right to change their minds. Why would this Government deny them a say? We cannot go on like this. We need clarity, certainty and conclusion; this continued turbulence is sending our economy into further insecurity. At a time when this place should be doing more to end homelessness, to decrease worklessness, to stop universal credit hardship, to safeguard our NHS—I could go on—this Prime Minister and this Government are distracted and divided. It is time they got on with the day job.

Mr Cunningham

I picked up a point the right hon. Gentleman made earlier in response to Government Members. Scotland faces the same as the rest of the country. Under this deal there is a lot of uncertainty and unknowns. The EU can almost tell us what to do. So far, the Government have come forward with no plan B. We do not even know at the end of this deal what is going to happen. Expenditure has been guaranteed only up to 2020. That affects universities, research and development, and the major manufacturers in this country. Does he agree that this is a disgrace?

Ian Blackford

I do agree with the hon. Gentleman that what the Government have put forward is a plan for transition; there is no certainty for the long term. That is why Members from around this House, including Government Members, have to call a halt to this, and we should be doing that this week. We should be doing it on the basis that there is a real threat to the jobs, incomes and security of all our people of a Prime Minister who is recklessly taking us towards a potential no deal. We, as a House, should be putting a stop to it, and that is the opportunity we should be taking this week.

Ian Blackford

I am going to make progress, and I am not going to take any more interventions, as I have been generous with my time.

Yesterday, the Prime Minister told us she was planning for a no-deal Brexit. Prime Minister, there cannot be no deal; it must be removed from the table. It would be economically catastrophic. This Government must remove no deal from the table, instead of using it as gun to hold to MPs heads. We were promised “strong and stable”. The people were promised that we would take back control. This is a party and a Government completely out of control. I look around this Chamber at colleagues and friends, and perhaps some who would call themselves foes, but in common we came here to serve. I came here to serve Scotland—my people and my country. It devastates me to see the will of my people disregarded by this UK Government. It angers me to see my Parliament in Scotland—our Parliament in Scotland—our First Minister and her Cabinet locked out by this Tory Government from decisions that will affect the rights and lives of people right across our country. It is not right, and Members from other parts will feel the same. I know that England and Wales voted

to leave, but what about the rest of us who voted to stay? So much for the union of equals that we were promised.

The Scottish National party will work with others to protect all of the UK from Brexit. That is the right thing to do. We will work constructively in the House, but our first priority as the Scottish National party is to stand up for Scotland. It is becoming ever clearer that Scotland is being hampered by its continuance in the United Kingdom. We do not co-exist in a partnership of equals. With every day that passes, the Government are making the case for Scottish independence. The UK Government's behaviour over the continuity Bill, exposed this week by the UK Supreme Court, shows the utter contempt with which they are treating Scotland. With the UK Government's approach to Brexit in complete and utter chaos, it is no wonder the Scottish Parliament does not trust Westminster to prepare our laws for life after Brexit. Of course, when there was the outrageous power grab of the powers of the Scottish Parliament, not one Scottish Tory MP stood up to defend the rights of our Parliament, for which the people of Scotland voted in 1997. They voted against Scotland's interests: history repeating itself once again.

We get from the Government empty, meaningless words—that is all we can expect from them—and now those words are not worth the paper they are transcribed on, as promise after promise is broken by the UK Government. It is time we had our say and got our answers. I am sorry he is not present, but let me put it to the Leader of the Opposition again: table a vote of no confidence in this Government. We are with you. It is clear today that the gimmick motion has failed, but I say to the Leader of the Opposition: table the correct motion and do it today. The SNP stands ready to end this farce—to end this shambles. We are ready to defeat this Tory Government and a damaging Brexit. This Tory Government want to put Scottish workers on the dole through Brexit. The question for the Leader of the Opposition is whether he is prepared to stand up—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing)

Order. That is enough. The right hon. Gentleman is concluding his speech. He will do so and he will be listened to.

Ian Blackford

A failure to table a motion of no confidence will be a dereliction of duty. We now need to call time on this Government. The Prime Minister's time is up. The Government must go. We cannot allow the Conservatives to drive us off the cliff edge. The Leader of the Opposition cannot also seek to run down the clock to buy himself more time. He claims he wants an election; well, if he wants this Government out, he should listen to the other Opposition parties. We will support him in a vote of no confidence. Now is the time for courage. Now is the time for all of us to stand up for our communities. Now is the time for the Prime Minister to stand down, and for this Government to stand aside and let the people decide.

14:44:00

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay)

Notwithstanding the tone of the remarks by the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), or indeed his conclusion asking the Prime Minister to stand down—in opening his remarks he asked the Prime Minister to stand here and reply—and notwithstanding the inherent contradictions at both the start and the end of his speech, I congratulate him on securing the debate. I recognise that this is an important issue and one on which I know, given that the Prime Minister took questions for two and a half hours yesterday, many Members wish to contribute. I shall therefore keep my remarks relatively brief, but I wish to address directly a number of the points raised by the right hon. Gentleman. He opened his speech by saying that there is a binary choice—

Ian Blackford

That's what you are doing.

Stephen Barclay

I am slightly confused: I am simply quoting back to the right hon. Gentleman how he opened his speech, which he seems to be taking issue with. Members might be forgiven for having slightly lost the train of his argument, but let me remind them—

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP)

rose—

Stephen Barclay

I understand why the hon. Lady does not want to hear her leader's remarks quoted back, so will happily take her intervention.

Carol Monaghan

Does the Secretary of State understand the word “binary”? It means two parts, which means there are two choices. At the moment, the two choices open are deal or no deal. That is binary.

Stephen Barclay

I appreciate the hon. Lady's pointing out the definition of “binary”. I was coming on to say that I think there is a third choice, to which the Prime Minister has repeatedly alerted the House: the risk of no Brexit at all. My point was that the right hon. Gentleman argued that there was a binary choice, while the substance of his remarks was to argue for a third choice. That seems to be an inherent contradiction in the case that he put forward. Notwithstanding that, he went on in the next section of his speech to talk about honesty. I do not think that the way to demonstrate honesty, particularly to the young electorate of which he spoke, is to say to that electorate, “We will give you a choice and respect that choice,” and then when the electorate deliver that choice to say, “Sorry, we are not actually going to honour that.” To me, that is not the way to approach a debate with honesty.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con)

The referendum had the second largest turnout of any electoral exercise in the entire history of the United Kingdom, and we know that the result was a margin of 1.4 million, but when I listen to the Scottish nationalists speak it appears to me that not only do they want to say no to that result—the democratic wishes of the people of the United Kingdom—but to ignore completely the fact that more than 1 million Scottish people voted to leave the European Union. Does my right hon. Friend believe that they should have their voices heard as well?

Stephen Barclay

I very much agree with my hon. Friend. It is not just that SNP Members want to say no; they seem to say no to the decision of the electorate but yes to giving them a decision. They gave them a decision on the independence referendum but then said that they did not want to listen to it. There was then the decision on the EU referendum, but they say they do not want to listen to that, either.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP)

Will the Secretary of State give way?

Stephen Barclay

Of course I will give way to the hon. Lady, but the point is that if one is talking of honesty and listening to the electorate, the starting point is to respect the decisions that the electorate take.

Patricia Gibson

Once again, we have a Tory Front Bencher or Prime Minister coming to the House and talking, because it suits them to talk, about the result of the referendum, but taking no cognisance of the fact that cheating occurred, according to the Electoral Commission, or of the fact that people were lied to about £350 million a week for the NHS. As the Secretary of State wants to talk about honesty, will he face up to the fact that people were lied to, as pointed out by the former Tory Prime Minister John Major?

Stephen Barclay

Far be it from me to keep pointing out contradictions, but the right hon. leader of the SNP began his remarks by saying that he wanted the Prime Minister to come to the Dispatch Box, and now we have interventions complaining about the fact that the Prime Minister has been coming to the Dispatch Box. If the hon. Lady would like to draw attention to the fact that the Government are committing an extra £20.5 billion a year to the NHS to ensure that it is fit for the future, I am grateful to her for doing so.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con)

I thank the Minister so much for giving way. I am deeply confused. If we are to leave with a deal, which is what the leader of the SNP in this Parliament says, then the deal needs to be voted through both in this Parliament and in the European Parliament. In the European Parliament, the members of the SNP who sit in that Parliament have voted in support of the principles of this deal time and again. Has the Secretary of State any idea why SNP MEPs support this deal, but SNP MPs appear not to?

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP)

On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wonder whether you can help me. The hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford)—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing)

Order. I must hear the hon. and learned Lady.

Joanna Cherry

The hon. Member for Chelmsford has directly and, I am sure, inadvertently misrepresented the position of the two SNP Members of the European Parliament, both of whom are personal friends of mine. I can absolutely assure her that they have made their position clear that they are against this deal. Indeed, one of them was my co-litigant in the article 50 case. I ask your assistance for the third time in a week, Madam Deputy Speaker, about how I can go about correcting misrepresentations of the facts about Scottish politics coming from the Government Benches and the Benches behind them.

Madam Deputy Speaker

I appreciate that the hon. and learned Lady has very cleverly made her point into a point of order by asking my advice. I say to her that, of course, she does not need my advice, as she has just taken the opportunity of her point of order to put her point on the record. It is not for me to judge whether the hon. Lady or the hon. and learned Lady are correct in their interpretation of something that has happened in another Parliament, but I am satisfied that both points of view have been put to the Chamber.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald

Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. As I think you know, I have the greatest of respect for you, but it occurs to me from what you have just said that the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) can just come here, as she has done, make stuff up and then nothing happens. There has to be consequence for that. [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker

Order. Nobody can come here and “make stuff up” that is not correct, but this is a debating chamber, and there are opinions on both sides of the House. I would be the first to say that, if this is a matter of fact, I am concerned that a matter of fact should be properly represented in this Chamber—[Interruption.] Order!

Vicky Ford
rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker

I will allow the hon. Lady a brief “further to that point of order”.

Vicky Ford

Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. My understanding is that the SNP MEPs have backed numerous resolutions that set out the principles behind this deal, and have been quoted in the press releases by their group as backing—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker

Order. [Interruption.] Order. We will have no more on this subject. The fact is that there are different interpretations of the actions of people in a Parliament other than this. I am satisfied that both sides have been heard, and that the facts are on the record. We will leave aside that point of order and allow the Secretary of State to continue with his speech.

Stephen Barclay

One could be forgiven perhaps for being confused over the SNP’s position on these matters, because no doubt the electorate are also confused. They were told in 2014 that there was a vote to listen to the Scottish people. The Scottish people duly spoke and said that they wanted to be a part of the United Kingdom, and now the position appears to be to no longer listen to the Scottish people and to ignore their views.

Stephen Barclay

I shall take two more interventions and then I will make some progress.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con)

I thank the Secretary of State for giving way as I was not afforded the courtesy of being able to intervene on the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford). As he spoke about the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence, he set out to the House how great the White Paper was that the SNP had produced. The SNP no longer stands by its White Paper on Scottish independence. Does that not just show what the SNP is all about? It is not even worth listening to, because what it speaks about, not even it can defend.

Stephen Barclay

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. It is perhaps not a surprise that, notwithstanding its 800 pages, one could finish reading it and still be left confused as to what the SNP’s position is.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con)

I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way. It is good to hear him have at least a few sentences before being interrupted by the SNP. Does he envisage any circumstances in which the Government might revoke article 50—a de facto extension of article 50—in order to give the Government more time to prepare for a World Trade Organisation-terms Brexit, or to prepare for a better deal given by Europe to the United Kingdom? Does he envisage any such circumstances within, perhaps, the next two months?

Stephen Barclay

I am grateful to my hon. Friend; he raises a point of substance. The point is that the court case was clear that one cannot revoke as a temporary measure with a view to the circumstances to which he alludes. That actually is not within the scope of what the court case says. I will come on to that if I get a chance to progress further in my remarks.

Let me pick up on a further point that the right hon. Gentleman made at the opening of this debate. He said that we should not be spending money on no-deal planning. Well, the reality is that I would prefer not to be spending money on no-deal planning.

Ian Blackford

On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I ask for your guidance, because I think it is important that we are all honest in this place. If anyone looks at the record, they will see that what I did say was that we are wasting money on no deal that should be invested in frontline services. The Secretary of State has a duty to make sure that he is correct.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing)

Order. Again, I am not the adjudicator of whether what any Member says here is correct as far as other Members are concerned, but it is my duty and my intention to make sure that the facts and the truth are always on the record. I am quite sure that the Secretary of State will deal with that point.

Stephen Barclay

I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your clarification. I am very happy to stand by that clarification. I thought that the substance of what the right hon. Gentleman was saying—I realise that there was a lot of confusion over his speech—was that he was not in favour of spending money on no deal preparations. I thought that was the kernel of his point. Perhaps he is in favour of spending money on no deal preparation.

Ian Blackford

indicated dissent.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con)

rose—

Stephen Barclay

I give way to my hon. Friend with pleasure.

Alec Shelbrooke

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. Perhaps he can shed some light on the confusion that I feel following the right hon. Gentleman's speech. He spoke of wanting a second referendum and a people's vote, but he said that he did want no deal on it, and he did not want the deal on it. Can we have a referendum with just one question on it, which is to remain?

Stephen Barclay

My hon. Friend points to how one might achieve that unicorn, which is to end the uncertainty over the SNP's position. Notwithstanding the fact that it is a waste of money to have multiple referendums—that waste of money is obviously acceptable whereas other ways of wasting of money are not—I simply draw the attention of the House to the fact that the best way to avoid incurring the cost of no deal is to back the Prime Minister's deal.

Alan Brown

rose—

Stephen Barclay

I want to make some progress. I have taken a fair number of interventions. I did start by saying that I was very conscious that many Members would want to come in on the debate. The first two speeches have taken quite a bit of time, so I should probably crack on.

The responsible act of a Government is to prepare for the contingency of a no deal, but it is absolutely our priority to secure a deal, and that is what the Prime Minister continues to work day and night to do.

Let me make some progress. As the Prime Minister set out yesterday, we intend to return to the meaningful vote debate in the week commencing 7 January and to hold the vote the following week. As I will set out, that is consistent with our crucial next step of responding to the concerns expressed by MPs on the backstop and I make no bones about accepting, as the Prime Minister has done, that the deal that the Government secured was not going to win the support of the House without further reassurance, and that is the message that the Prime Minister has been clear about in her meetings and communications with EU leaders.

At last week's European Council, the Prime Minister faithfully and firmly reflected the concerns of this House over the Northern Ireland backstop.

In response, the EU27 published a series of conclusions, making it clear that it is their

“firm determination to work speedily on a subsequent agreement that establishes by 31st December 2020 alternative arrangements, so that the backstop will not need to be triggered.”

The EU27 also gave a new assurance in relation to the future partnership with the UK to make it even less likely that the backstop would ever be needed, by stating that the EU

“stands ready to embark on preparations immediately after signature of the Withdrawal Agreement to ensure that negotiations can start as soon as possible after the UK's withdrawal.”

EU leaders could not have been clearer; they do not want to use this backstop. The conclusions from the European Council go further than the EU has ever done previously in trying to address the concerns of this House. Of course, they sit on top of the commitments that we have already negotiated in relation to the backstop. Let us remember the real choice, which is between the certainty of a deal and the uncertainty of the alternatives.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con)

Does the Secretary of State agree that the best way to provide security for the economy is to agree the deal? We heard a great deal from the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) about jeopardising jobs and people losing jobs. If we agreed the deal and the Prime

Minister could get some security over the backstop, it would provide the greatest security for jobs that we could give the whole nation, including the Scottish.

Stephen Barclay

I am sure my hon. Friend speaks for the vast majority of businesses in Taunton Deane and elsewhere in the United Kingdom that want the certainty of a deal, the benefits of an implementation period that allows businesses to continue trading as now until the end of 2020, and the many other benefits secured by this deal, including a skills-based immigration system, the protections for 3 million EU citizens living in the UK and over 1 million UK nationals living in the EU, an end to spending vast sums of money and control of our fishing policy.

Anna Soubry

I am very grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way; it is good of him to take so many interventions. By the way, I would like publicly to congratulate him on his appointment.

The difficulty with the argument about the so-called deal and trade is that we do not have the promised deal on trade. The promised certainty, particularly in relation to frictionless trade, is not in the withdrawal agreement, which is fixed in law and will be in the treaty, but in the political declaration, which can be ripped up by either side once we have left. The certainty that business is crying out for is unfortunately not delivered by the Prime Minister's withdrawal agreement.

Stephen Barclay

My right hon. Friend speaks with great passion on this issue and she is right about the importance of certainty. First, many businesses particularly value the certainty of the implementation period that is delivered to 2020. Secondly, it was interesting that many people who were critical of the Prime Minister over the joint statement in December 2017, which was a political declaration, were critical on the basis that it was binding. Some of the same critics now criticise the political declaration reached alongside the withdrawal agreement because they argue that it is not binding. There is an inconsistency there.

What is clear, as the Attorney General has set out to the House in a series of statements and questions, is the legal wiring that exists between the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration, giving the framework on which the future economic relationship will be based. That will give us confidence as we move forward into the second phase.

Wera Hobhouse

The Secretary of State has just mentioned the political declaration last December. Clearly what was legally binding was the backstop, about which everybody is now very unhappy because the political declaration is not legally binding. The right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) is absolutely right that that creates worry and uncertainty. The certainty is the backstop. The Government need to come clean and be honest with everybody—Conservative Members and the public—that the backstop is legally binding.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con)

At least we're here!

Stephen Barclay

The hon. Lady is correct that a backstop will be required in any deal that is reached with the European Union, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) commented from a sedentary position, on an issue of such importance to the Lib Dems, it is good that the hon. Lady—

unlike any of her Lib Dem colleagues—is actually in the House to make that point with such conviction.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab)

I am very grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way; he is being characteristically generous.

We read that the Cabinet is now stepping up preparations for no deal, and the Government have quite rightly given a commitment to the more than 3 million European citizens here in the UK that their rights will be protected in that eventuality. Will the Secretary of State tell the House what assurance he or his predecessors have received from the other member states about the position of the 1.2 million Brits who may find themselves without rights in those circumstances?

Stephen Barclay

Let me first pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman for his work through the Exiting the European Union Committee. He will be aware of a number of the public statements that have been made—for example, in respect of the French position on safeguarding the rights of UK nationals in Europe. However, he points to the wider point about the best way to secure the rights of our own nationals in the EU, which is through the deal that the Prime Minister has agreed.

The right hon. Gentleman will be familiar with the written ministerial statement that I tabled about the position of EU citizens in the UK, which this House has long debated. As a former Health Minister, I am very conscious of the hugely valuable role that EU citizens play in our NHS, as in many other parts of our business and public life. We have made that unilateral declaration, but the right hon. Gentleman is correct that that has not been offered in all the 27 member states. Obviously that is an area of focus for us. A number of statements have been made, but the deal is the best way of securing those rights for UK nationals.

When the Prime Minister entered into this negotiation, she was told that there was a binary choice between two off-the-peg models—what are colloquially known as the Canada option and the Norway option—yet she has secured a bespoke option. From listening to this House, we have heard loud and clear the concern about the backstop element of the deal, notwithstanding the fact that there is no alternative deal that would not bring a backstop. The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber is an experienced parliamentarian, but he must know that it is not an option for Scotland to remain in the single market when the people of Scotland voted to remain in the United Kingdom, and that United Kingdom is leaving the European Union.

The truth is there are three deals on offer, including the deal that the Prime Minister has secured and the option of no deal, which is not desirable. It is worth pointing out to the House that although the Government are preparing extensively for the consequence of a no deal, not all the factors that affect a no deal are within the Government's control, as the situation is affected by what businesses themselves do and what other member states do.

Alan Brown

Will the Secretary of State give way?

Stephen Barclay

I am conscious of time, so I want to wrap up.

Cabinet members met today to discuss how, as a responsible Government, we are preparing for that possibility, which—like it or not—remains a risk that this House runs if it does not support a deal.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab)

I am very grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way; he is being very generous. He says that he does not seek a no-deal scenario, and I completely take him at his word, but he equally says that a responsible Government are preparing for that possibility. Can he remind the House how big a fall in our GDP there would be if we went down that route? I recall that it is around 10%. That is about £200 billion per annum. Is it responsible to even countenance that? I do not think it is.

Stephen Barclay

As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Treasury Committee looked at the economic impact of the various models, and the modelling of a no-deal scenario shows a far worse impact than that of a deal. That is exactly why we are seeking a deal.

Members need to accept that it is not enough for them to be opposed to things when the default position of being opposed to everything means that the risk of no deal increases. Advocating a further referendum is not a realistic option. One reason for that is the interplay with the timing of the European Parliament elections, which act as a significant constraint on the ability to have a second referendum. A second referendum would also be a significant risk to our Union, as it would be the excuse that the SNP and others would use to call for a second Scottish referendum.

This deal will come back to this House in the new year, when we have had time to respond to the concerns expressed to date and hold further discussions with the EU27. There is broad support across the House for much of the deal. It is a good deal, the only deal, and I believe it is the right deal to offer to the country. I hope that Members of this House will look again at the risks to jobs and services of no deal, and the risk to our democracy of not leaving, and will choose to back the deal when it returns to the House.

15:09:00

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab)

I thank the SNP for securing this debate and the Speaker's Office for granting it.

It is obvious that we have reached an impasse. The Prime Minister spent two years negotiating a deal that she now knows cannot command the support of this House. I am not trying to make a point against the Secretary of State, but I think he acknowledged just a moment ago that he accepts that the deal currently before the House is not going to get the support of the House. That is therefore the position of the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State.

But rather than confront that reality, the Prime Minister refuses to put her deal forward for a vote this week, instead kicking it into the new year. The problem for the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State is that it is accepted that this deal cannot command the support of the House, but abundantly clear from last week's EU Council that the Government cannot renegotiate the withdrawal agreement. So the one thing the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State know needs to happen for the position to change was rebuffed last week, and, at most, only non-binding "clarifications" could be possible. That is the impasse.

The President of the EU Commission said that there is "no room whatsoever" for renegotiation. The Commission spokesperson said:

"The European Council has given the clarifications that were possible at this stage, so no further meetings with the United Kingdom are foreseen."

I do not suppose that informal meetings cannot go on, but there will be no formal meetings. I think some of us thought that there might just be the chance, coming out of last week's summit, that there would be a further round, or a few days, of further negotiations by the teams, but that is not going to happen. The EU Council statement made it clear that the withdrawal agreement is "not open for renegotiation".

However much the Prime Minister or the Secretary of State—for understandable reasons, perhaps—pretend otherwise, that is now the reality that we face, and that is why the vote needs to come back to this House this week. This deal cannot be changed by the Prime Minister, new negotiations are not even taking place, and we have only three months before the 29 March deadline. The Government's response—to delay, to play for time, and to hope somehow that the deal will look more appetising in the new year—is not going to work. The reality is that the Government are running down the clock, but running down the clock is not governing, and it is certainly not governing in the national interest. Observers sometimes say to me that the Prime Minister is resilient, but this is not resilience—it is recklessness.

James Heappey

It might be argued that the Government are not the only part of this House to be kicking the can down the road, and that the right hon. and learned Gentleman may well have been wanting to participate in a different debate today. Is that not happening because his right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition is inept, or invertebrate?

Keir Starmer

I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for my caution in taking advice from the Government on when the Opposition should table a motion of no confidence in the Government. Last week, I heard plenty of Conservative Members say, "Bring it on." In the role that I currently occupy, many people on both sides of the House give me their opinions all the time, and very rarely do two people agree on the way forward.

It is wholly unacceptable to delay the meaningful vote for another month in the knowledge that there is no realistic chance of delivering material changes to this deal. Yesterday, the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) said in this House that the Prime Minister is

"asking the House to accept a deferral for several weeks of the meaningful vote on the draft withdrawal agreement, on the basis that further assurances can be agreed with the European Union, but there is nothing in what she has said today or in what has been reported from the EU Council to suggest that those further assurances are likely to be given."—[Official Report, 17 December 2018; Vol. 651, c. 540.]

That is the problem. That is why, rather than having this debate today, the Government should be putting their deal to the House, because if that deal is defeated, everybody then needs to put the national interest first. We need to confront what the achievable and available options are and decide, as a House, what happens next in a way that protects jobs and the economy.

But what we hear from the Government is the opposite: delay over a meaningful vote, and then the distraction of no deal, hence today's headlines about £2 billion for no-deal planning. Talking up no deal has always been misguided and, in my view, deeply irresponsible. The Treasury estimates that a no-deal outcome would mean a 9.3% decline in GDP over 15 years. It would see every region of the UK worse off. It would mean 20% tariffs on agri-foods and significant tariffs on manufactured goods. It would mean no common security arrangements in place, and a hard border in Northern Ireland. It would be catastrophic for the UK. That is why no deal has never truly been a viable

option. It is a political hoax, and I think that, deep down, the Government and the Prime Minister know it. I know from personal experience how seriously the Prime Minister takes the security arrangements of the United Kingdom, and to put ourselves in a position where they would be jeopardised is not, I think, something that, deep down, she thinks could possibly be acceptable for this country.

Hilary Benn

My right hon. and learned Friend is making a most forceful case. I agree that the Government understand the risks just as well as we do. Given that, what possible purpose does he think is served by the Government continuing to pretend that they are prepared for the country to go over the edge of a cliff at the end of March? Would it not help, in this crisis we face, if the Government said, “We’re not going to let that happen”? Then the alternatives that we will have to consider if the deal is defeated would become even clearer than they can be for as long as no deal appears to exist as a possibility when every single one of us in this Chamber knows that it cannot happen.

Keir Starmer

What I think is happening—it saddens me to say so—is that the Government are running down the clock in order to put maximum pressure on Members to face what the Government will present as a binary choice between the proposed deal that is before us and no deal. That is the only purpose left in this delay. Yes, it would help a great deal if we could have clarification now that no deal is not a viable option. It would allow us to focus on other options and to take the necessary steps to advance those options in the time that is available. I call on the Secretary of State to give that clarification if he feels able.

If the Government had ever been serious about delivering a no-deal outcome, they would not be panicking like this at the 11th hour—they would already have had extra staff trained and resources in place. They would already have had the vast infrastructure that would be needed at UK borders and ports.

It is all very well those on the Government Front Bench shaking their heads—[Interruption.] If they will just listen, I will quote their own Chancellor, who said two weeks ago in response to a question from the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) that

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

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

If I was making that point, people might say, “Well, that’s just the Opposition,” but that is the Chancellor’s assessment. When the Chancellor says that, what is the answer from the Prime Minister or those on the Front Bench? What is the answer from the Government?

In a report in October, the National Audit Office said:

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

and that

“organised criminals and others are likely to be quick to exploit any perceived weaknesses or gaps in the enforcement regime. This, combined with the UK’s potential loss of access to EU security, law enforcement and criminal justice tools, could create security weaknesses”.

The NAO has also said—this is a serious point that I have raised a number of times but not heard an answer from the Government on:

“If customs declarations are required for trade between the UK and the existing EU, HMRC estimates that the total number of customs declarations could increase by around 360%, from the 55 million currently made on non-EU trade to 255 million.”

That is an increase in customs declarations from 55 million to 255 million three months from today, in a no-deal Brexit. What is the answer to that?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart)
Support the deal!

Keir Starmer

The cries to support the deal would have a lot more authority if those on the Government Benches were supporting the deal. The Government are utterly split on this. Last Wednesday’s no-confidence vote exposed the fracture, and there is no point pretending it is not there.

Over the summer, the previous Brexit Secretary published 106 technical notices setting out the Government’s case for preparing for no deal. They did not get a huge amount of attention at the time, but it is worth reading and re-reading them, as my team and I have done, and as the Institute for Government has done. Those technical notices make it clear that the Government’s managed no deal would require the creation or expansion of 15 quangos, further legislation in 51 areas, the negotiation of 40 new international agreements with either the EU or other countries and the introduction of 55 new systems and processes. That is the analysis of the 106 technical notices—the Government’s own assessment.

The case I am making is that the argument that there should or could be no deal on 29 March is completely lacking in any viability whatsoever. The very idea that there could be legislation in 51 areas, 40 new international agreements, 15 new quangos and 55 new systems and processes in the next three months only has to be spelled out. That is not my assessment; it is the Government’s own assessment. It is not credible to pretend that that can be done by 29 March.

Anna Soubry

I have a great deal of respect for the right hon. and learned Gentleman, but not for the Opposition in this respect. He makes a good point—so are the Opposition now going to do their job of being an effective Opposition? By way of example, will we see an urgent question being asked in this place tomorrow about the Government’s plans for no deal? The Opposition have to put their money where their mouth is.

Keir Starmer

I respect the right hon. Lady, but what the Opposition do is a matter for us. It is not for the Government to give the Opposition advice on how to proceed with a no-confidence motion. If I am wrong, I will be corrected, but I think I heard her criticising us for not laying the motion last week so that she could get on and vote against it. I did not find that advice helpful in trying to come to a decision on how the Opposition should proceed.

Legislation on a proposed no deal would have to be passed by a Government who can no longer pass legislation, and these preparations now come with a £2 billion price tag. That is throwing good money after bad. I hope the Secretary of State will set out as soon as possible how that money will be spent, whether Parliament will have the chance to approve those measures and when no-deal legislation will be put before the House—at least in draft form, for us to see what it looks like and comment on it.

By now, the Government intended to have a deal agreed by the House. It is obvious that that is not going to happen. The Government need to get a grip and bring forward the vote. Let this House vote, then let us have a debate about the available and achievable options—and no deal cannot be one of them. I do not think for a minute that a majority in this House would countenance a no-deal Brexit. The price of delay will, as ever, be paid by the British people, businesses and communities, and that is a very sorry end to a year of failure.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing)

Order. Before I call the next speaker, the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), let me say that it will be obvious to the House that a great many Members wish to speak, and we have only until just after 5 o'clock. We must therefore have a formal time limit, starting with five minutes. I know that that will be difficult for the right hon. Lady, but she will deal with it.

15:24:00

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con)

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) on securing this debate. I read the news in Aberdeen for a number of years, so I learned how to pronounce Scots. In all seriousness, I offer him my congratulations on securing this debate, and of course agree with much of what he said. I also agree with the analysis and with much of what was said by the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer). The Government have made a grave error in taking this matter away from Parliament, delaying it for what will be at least a month and then undertaking to bring it back for the inevitable conclusion that would have been reached had the vote occurred the week before last—or was it last week? It seems in all of this as though time disappears, but it has been a grave mistake.

I agree with both the right hon. Gentleman and the right hon. and learned Gentleman said when they talk about the clock ticking away. I am afraid I have to say that I think the Government are playing the ultimate game of brinkmanship—it is deeply irresponsible—with Conservative Members, who are divided, as everybody knows. Unfortunately, the Government are flagging up to those who fear no deal as ultimately the worst thing that could happen, as they should do, that it is in some way acceptable, and they have never taken it off the table as we should have done two and a half years ago.

Of course, the Government are forgetting that we have no mandate: there is no mandate in this country for a hard Brexit. Everybody seems to forget that when we went to the polls in June 2017, the Conservative party lost its majority. We were saved, if I may say so, only by our brilliant Scottish Conservative MPs. However, we lost well over 30 Members from these Benches—hon. Friends—and we in effect lost that election. We lost our majority, and it was clear that the people of this country did not support a hard Brexit. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister should have taken it off the table then. Indeed, she must take it off the table now, because it is worst possible outcome.

I say with great respect to my hon. Friends that, in the game of brinkmanship being played, those who share the conclusion that a hard Brexit is the worst possible outcome are being told—we have heard this in calls from the Front Bench, and in some of the chuntering and comments from hon. Friends sitting along the Back Benches—“Well, if you don’t want a hard Brexit, you’ve got to vote for the Prime Minister’s deal”, as if there is no alternative. Indeed, there is an alternative. [Interruption.] Yes, there is, I gently say to the Government Whip sitting on the Front Bench.

Given the growing success of the people’s vote movement, those who want a hard Brexit are being told, “Ooh, if you don’t vote for the Prime Minister’s deal, you might get that dreadful thing called a second referendum, in which the people, knowing what Brexit now looks like, will have the opportunity to have a final say on it.”

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con)

Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that it is rather extraordinary, at a time when we say we wish to reflect what is sometimes described as the will of the people, that we seem intent on dragging the country out of the EU on the basis of an agreement that appears largely to be rejected by the electorate themselves as flawed?

Anna Soubry

Here is a surprise: of course I agree with my right hon. and learned Friend. I think we will also agree on this: Members on the Conservative Benches who think that we have somehow always wanted to be in the position we are in today of supporting a second referendum are absolutely wrong. Many of us—in fact, all of us—voted for triggering article 50 with a firm determination to be absolutely true to the referendum result. We sought to make compromises, and to reach out and form consensus. That is why it is so interesting—this is a fact—that Scottish National party Members, for example, would have voted for the single market and the customs union, as would many right hon. and hon. Members on the Opposition Benches; I know that Plaid Cymru Members, the Green MP, and so on and so forth would have done. There was a majority in this place for what is now called Norway plus, but that time passed; too many people who said in private that they supported it did not show the courage when it was needed, for reasons that I understand. That ship has now long set sail, but there are alternatives, and there are things that must now occur.

Many of us reached the conclusion that going back to the people was the only right and proper thing to do, for a number of reasons. It has become increasingly clear that many people have changed their minds. It is two and a half years on from the referendum. People now understand far more—this includes hon. and right hon. Members in this place—about what Brexit means and what it looks like. Many have discovered the huge benefits that our membership of the European Union conveys to our country—we have the best, and indeed a unique, deal. Those are many of the reasons why we now support and ask for a people’s vote.

We also look at the 2 million young people who were denied a vote in 2016 by virtue of their age and who now demand a stake and a say in their future because they will bear the brunt if we get this wrong. I gently say to colleagues that if we leave without that vote and it turns out that the people of this country would have voted to remain in the European Union had they been given a vote, they will never forgive us; they will have no faith left in politics, but they will never forgive the Conservative party, and we will take all the consequences.

We need to get this matter back before us. We need to have on the table, with meaningful votes, all the alternatives that are available to us. If we cannot settle on one, we have to look at the process, and that must be a people’s vote or a general election. What is the best? What do the people want? A people’s vote.

15:31:00

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry). I congratulate my party leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), on securing this important debate.

The Prime Minister has yet again returned from Brussels with no progress made in stopping her disastrous Brexit plan. She is clinging to the life raft from her sinking ship while her Cabinet plot against her. The Cabinet Office Secretary is having meetings with Opposition MPs to try to find consensus. The Foreign Secretary has said publicly that it will not be possible to get a version of the Prime Minister's deal passed in this place. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions urges the Prime Minister's Government to try something different because she thinks Parliament is currently headed towards no compromise, no agreement and no deal. The EU is not shifting and has said that the withdrawal agreement is not up for renegotiation.

The Prime Minister is impervious to all of this and is continuing to push her deal on this Parliament and the UK, despite the fact that she knows it will not be voted through. She is ignoring the effect of her actions: sterling is plunging, as are stock prices and growth, but that does not seem to register with her. The Prime Minister's Brexit uncertainty is a nightmare for our constituents and local businesses.

I represent a constituency that voted decisively to remain. Businesses want certainty, but they face the prospect of a Government going into emergency planning mode, and they have been given no direction from the Government. Small and medium-sized enterprises are the backbone of our economy, and they will face an especially difficult time. In the Budget, the SNP called for an office to be set up to support all SMEs in navigating new customs arrangements. The UK Government have done almost nothing to clarify the business environment for SMEs and are not helping them to plan for the worst, despite their commitment to do so.

The Prime Minister has stood at the Dispatch Box repeatedly to defend her indefensible deal. She has pulled the meaningful vote until 14 January, in the vain hope that she can wear down those who oppose it. All options, other than staying in the EU, will be damaging, and the UK public certainly did not vote for an outcome that is bad for the economy and their families.

We in Parliament must be allowed to come together before 14 January to defeat the deal and to move forward. There is no majority for anything except defeating the Prime Minister's deal. We need to acknowledge that Westminster's two-party system is broken and Parliament is now a place of factions, not parties. There should be a people's vote. Things have changed in the past two years: there are serious doubts about the conduct of the referendum, there was no clarity about the consequences of leaving the EU and there is serious doubt about the legality of funding. People have a much clearer idea of the consequences of leaving the EU and they should be allowed to vote with that much clearer understanding.

Her Majesty's Opposition have tabled a motion of no confidence in the Prime Minister, a symbolic action only. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), along with the leaders of the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and the Green party, has tabled an amendment, which calls for a vote of no confidence in the UK Government, to Labour's vote of no confidence. I call on the Labour party to move us all forward on a vote of no confidence in the Government.

In July 2016, the Prime Minister stood on the steps of Downing Streets and said:

“We are living through an important moment in our country’s history. Following the referendum, we face a time of great national change.”

We now also face a time of great national uncertainty.

15:36:00

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con)

As I speak today, we are just over 100 days from Britain leaving the European Union. There is no plan being debated in this House, no vote in this House and no plan B. Instead what we see, depressingly for many people outside this place, is just party politics. Last week, we had the spectacle of a potential Tory leadership campaign, which I voted against. This week, we have the shambolic Opposition attempt to try to decide whether they have the confidence to bring a no confidence vote. I think people have a sense of drift in Parliament at the very moment when they want decisions to be taken that can help to get our country back on track as the clock ticks down towards Brexit.

People also recognise that, as has been the case for the past two and a half years, we are not discussing anything else. The issues they face in their day-to-day lives are going missing in this Chamber. The challenges my constituents face—South West Trains, housing, tax credits, universal credit and so on—are not being discussed in this Chamber with the level of intensity that the British people need if we are to play our role as a Parliament scrutinising the performance of Government. We have to get back on to the domestic agenda. Until we solve Brexit, we will not begin to get on to solving the challenges that people face in their day-to-day lives.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con)

I strongly respect my right hon. Friend, but if there were to be a second referendum and remain were to narrowly win, does she seriously think that that would draw a line under the European issue? Is it not far more likely that it would rumble on—and rumble on for a generation?

Justine Greening

We have to accept that this country will always debate its relationship with the European Union and our neighbouring countries on the continent of which we are a part. We are a part of the continent, but we are an island just off the mainland of that continent. It is almost an inevitability that we will continue to debate how close our relationship should be with our European neighbours. We should accept that as normal, instead of obsessing about it as a Parliament and as a country when there are so many other, more pressing issues in the 21st century that we now need to get on with.

Anna Soubry

Is it not also the case that, because the political declaration is so vague—so vague it cannot even be properly examined by Treasury officials—all this will carry on rumbling away? There will be big rows, because we still have not determined our final relationship with the European Union.

Justine Greening

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I was in Cabinet when we discussed the need for a transition period—but transitioning to something, not to nothing. Had the discussion then been that we were about to agree to do the political equivalent of jumping out of a plane without a parachute, the conversation would have been very different. That underwrites why the House is so unlikely to

agree not only the Prime Minister's withdrawal agreement, which has its issues of rules without say for an unspecified time, but the political declaration, which is just 26 pages long, yet is meant to cover the detail of our future relationship with our other European neighbours and the European Union. What we do not need is for Parliament to keep going round in circles; nor do we need delay. We need some certainty for businesses and people in our country, and that means that we need to do three things as a matter of urgency.

Parliament must have a vote on the Prime Minister's proposal and the deal. We cannot simply have the debate delayed and procrastination. We need a debate and a vote on the Prime Minister's deal. After that falls, as I expect it will, we then need to get on to debating and voting on the other options that other Members of the House have brought forward. Whether that is Norway plus or Canada, we have to look at those as a Parliament, debate them and decide whether there is a majority in the House for them. I do not believe that there will be. I think that that has been clear since the summer and that we have wasted months, still without reaching a conclusion on the fact that there is gridlock in the House. We will therefore have to have a vote of the people. I cannot see the rationale for a general election. It is self-serving of the Opposition to try to get one. Brexit is not about party politics; it is above party politics. That is why the only people's vote that we can have on Brexit is a referendum. We also have to recognise that if there is no consensus that we can find in Parliament, we have to trust people in our country to be able to find that consensus for themselves.

I finish by saying that there is no excuse in this House and from this Government for any further delay. We have spent two and a half years going round in circles, and we cannot simply go nowhere. We now have to take some decisions about going somewhere. We cannot have this continued dance from the Opposition about what their proposal is for Britain. Most people have realised that there is no proposal from the Opposition and that they face the same challenges as the Government in trying to square the circle of how to deliver a Brexit that is actually the Brexit that millions of leave voters voted for.

Similarly, and perhaps most importantly, I say to Government: do not delay the meaningful vote until the new year. MPs in this place would be happy to delay recess. Frankly, I would be happy to sit through Christmas and into the new year if it meant that we could find a direction on Brexit for businesses and people, who want certainty about where this country is going. There is nothing more important for this House to debate right now, and we have to find a route through. If the Government do not want that, they surely have to bring the House back on 3 January, when bank holidays in this country have been had, so that people going to work know that their Parliament is going back to work too to find a direction for this country. We have to do this sooner rather than later. People simply will not understand why this place is packing up and having a two-week holiday when we face the biggest constitutional crisis that this country has had in decades. It is simply wrong. The Government have to recognise that and they now need to take some decisions, take some action and make sure that this House has a chance to represent our communities on their deal, to vote it down and to work out where we go next.

15:44:00

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

It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening). On her challenge, on the Order Paper today I have tabled the European Union (Revocation of Notification of Withdrawal) Bill, because I think that there is consensus in the House that we do not want a no-deal Brexit and the chaos that would bring, including the lack of medicines, the lack of food, and economic catastrophe.

What the Bill says, in essence, is that a deal should be voted on here; if it is agreed to, it should subsequently be voted on by the people; if they agree to it, we should go merrily along that Brexit route; but if it is not agreed to, we should remain in the EU, which would mean the revocation of article 50. That is what people expect of this place. They do not expect some sort of chaos. I accept that the Prime Minister has done her best in a difficult situation, going to the EU to negotiate and trying to bring together two irreconcilable models, the pure Brexiteer and the pure remainer, but it is obvious that the Government, and the whole country, are split.

The Secretary of State has said, “We have already had a vote; we cannot have another.” The simple fact is that if the Secretary of State went to a restaurant and ordered a steak and a bit of chewed-up bacon arrived, he would have the right to send it back. The waiter would not have the right to say, “You ordered some food—eat it.” People were promised more money, more trade, more jobs, and “taking back control”, including control of migration. All that sounded great, and I can imagine a lot of sensible people voting for it, but what has been served up is a situation in which there is not more money. There is the £40 billion divorce bill, and there is the reduction in the size of the economy. We do not have more control. The Ministers have taken the control so that they can reduce environmental protections or workers’ rights below EU minimum standards in the future. We will still, in the deal, have to abide by the rules laid down by Europe, so we have not taken back control at all.

Alex Chalk

As I understand it, the Opposition’s position is that there is no chance of the deal’s being improved and therefore the Government should have the vote now, but if that is the case, there is even less chance of Labour’s alternative deal being approved. That means that with every passing day, the inexorable logic is that Labour is becoming an accessory to no deal. Does the hon. Gentleman not agree?

Geraint Davies

My own view is that Brexit is a betrayal of conservatism, because we are withdrawing from the most well-constructed market in the world. It obviously denies the Union, because any Brexit will mean an open border with open migration and products moving freely. Ultimately, that will not work. If we have a hard Brexit, there will be a hard border. I also think that Brexit is a betrayal of socialism, because it will mean a smaller cake that we will want to divide more equally, and it will leave a future Tory Government to undermine EU standards and workers’ rights and the environment in the future.

I make no apology for the fact that I am against Brexit and always was. I want a people’s vote because people’s eyes have now opened to the fact that this is an absolute nightmare. They voted for the steak, they got the bacon, and they do not want it. They want to stay with what they had before.

Furthermore, the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 itself empowers the Prime Minister to trigger article 50 on the basis of an advisory referendum. What we have found, and what the courts have found, is that the illegality in the leave campaign would be sufficient for a general election to be ruled void and for the Government to go back to the drawing board. I think that they need, legally, to think again about article 50, and if a deal cannot be agreed, they should withdraw it.

People talk about what will happen if there is another vote. Incidentally, this will not be another vote; it will be a vote on the deal, which is intrinsically different from a vote in principle on whether people want to stay in the European Union. I accept that people wanted to leave on the basis of what

they were told, but now that they have seen what has turned up—the bacon—they do not want to eat it, and they should have the right to send it back. That would not be the same as just having another referendum. As Keynes said, “When the facts change, I change my mind.” People say, “What if we had another vote and lost?” We have already lost. Britain will lose if we Brexit.

People say that there will be a lot of anger. Obviously there will be some anger, but people who have been made poorer and poorer by a Conservative Government since 2010 were told, “If you vote for Brexit, we will get rid of the foreigners, and you will have a better job and better services.” In fact, they will have less. They will be even poorer. Those people will not be angry; they will be massively enraged.

We are walking slowly along the road to fascism. That is what is happening in this country. We face a choice between being impoverished and isolated—going down a darkened tunnel with no apparent ending—and seeing the future and returning to the sunny uplands. That means joining the EU again, giving the people the choice as to what to do, and creating a better, stronger future for all our children.

We are at a moment in history when we have to choose whether we give the people a vote or not. Our children will either condemn us in the future for condemning them or will thank us for giving them the opportunity to choose their future in a much better world we can all share—a world in which we can defend our shared values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, rather than be cast aside, be much weaker, and find those values, in an uncertain world, under attack.

15:50:00

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribbles Valley) (Con)

It is a delight to be here in Parliament for another three hours of Brexit chat, and it is staggering to think, given when this all started, that José Mourinho is out of his club before we are out of ours. [Interruption.] It gets worse. I was listening carefully to the hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies), and I loved his honesty at least when he said that he does not want Brexit and that is why he is supporting the so-called people’s vote.

Geraint Davies

I am doing it because 25,000 jobs in Swansea depend on EU exports, and Swansea will be a lot worse off with Brexit.

Mr Evans

I admire that honesty, because a lot of people who bang on about this Orwellian concept of a people’s vote as if 2016 had not happened tend not to be as honest about their real motives. Their real motives are that they wish to stop Brexit; they wish to overturn the people’s vote of 2016.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab)

The situation is very simple: I do not want my constituents to be poorer than they are at the moment, which is why we are sitting here day after day trying to get the Government to do something about it.

Mr Evans

It is wonderful that there is so much honesty here now. One of the Sunday papers said that eight of the nine organisations that are now backing the people’s vote state explicitly on their websites that they are trying to overturn Brexit, so let us not have any pretence about that.

Mr Evans

I will not give way again, as I have taken my two interventions.

Let us not have any pretence about what is going on. Of course the people have spoken, including a million Scots who voted to leave the EU, and by a margin of 1.4 million the British people decided that they wished to go. I am well aware that I sit in a Parliament packed full of remain Members, and I understand that they are very angry and feel badly let down by the electorate. This really does turn things on their head; normally people are let down by their politicians, but in this case the politicians have been badly let down by the people. They were asked for their decision as to whether we should stay in or leave the EU. We had this massive exercise in 2016 when the British people said “We wish to leave,” and the politicians cannot quite get over it—the establishment cannot quite get over it, the BBC cannot quite get over it—and they have tried their level best since that vote to ensure that, one way or another, the decision of the British people is stymied.

There are 285 MPs who voted remain who represent leave areas, so I understand where people are coming from in this Chamber. But when sovereignty passed from this Parliament to the British people and we issued a pamphlet to every household that said that we would carry out their wishes, and when this Parliament itself voted for the referendum, really we do have to respect the wishes of the British people instead of refighting the referendum campaign of 2016.

Indeed, when we talk about what was written on the side of a bus and how much money was going to go into the national health service, I would have thought that Scottish nationalist Members of Parliament would be more interested in how much of our membership fees that are not now going to be sent to Brussels will be going to Scotland—to public services in Scotland, to the NHS in Scotland—rather than into the pockets of Brussels. Indeed, I am sure that President Juncker is very happy with his pay increase this week, which takes his salary to €32,700 a month; that is how much the President of the European Union is getting—way more in a month than most of my constituents earn in a year. I am delighted that we are coming out of the European Union and saving that money so I can see it being spent in my patch, and the Scottish nationalist Members will see it being spent in their patches as well.

Yes, I believe we got some things wrong at the beginning of the negotiations. The scheduling was completely wrong. It gave the EU negotiators a stick, in the form of the backstop over the Northern Ireland-Irish border, and they have hit us with that stick time and again. We are talking about a backstop that the United Kingdom and the European Union both say they do not want to use. They hope they will not need to use it, and they also say that it is going to be temporary. However, when our Prime Minister went to see President Juncker to raise our concerns about the possibility of our legally being able to be held in the European Union for an eternity if the EU so wishes, or of the backstop being used as leverage in the next round of trade talks between us and the European Union, all of a sudden they dug their heels in. They say that they do not want to use the backstop and that it will be temporary, but they are not prepared to allow us to leave the European Union unilaterally if we believe that they are stalling. That absolutely says it all.

I am delighted that the Prime Minister made it so clear yesterday that there would be no revocation of article 50 and no second referendum. She knows what a second referendum would be all about. I am delighted, too, that the Cabinet has today stepped up its preparations for WTO. As I said yesterday, President Juncker listens to what is said in this place, and he gets a bit of succour from the calls for a second referendum because he believes that if the first vote is overturned we will still be spending our money in the European Union and taking its laws. He gets a bit of succour from that, but he will also hear that we are stepping up plans for WTO, and that should provide some leverage.

We should not get angry with our Prime Minister. Where is the anger at President Juncker digging his heels in? Does he really want to see jobs being threatened in the European Union? We always hear people standing up in this place and talking about safeguarding jobs in Britain, but what about safeguarding jobs in Germany, Spain, Italy and the various other EU countries that want to sell their goods to us? We have a £95 billion deficit with the European Union. We buy 850,000 German cars and £3.5 billion-worth of flowers and plants from Holland, and we will want to carry on doing that.

I shall not be taking part in any of the debates tomorrow, so I just want to wish everybody—including you, Madam Deputy Speaker—a merry Christmas and a happy Brexit in 2019.

15:57:00

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC)

The Leader of the Opposition and the like-minded Conservative European Research Group say that they have no confidence in the Prime Minister. On these Benches, we have no confidence in the Prime Minister or in her Government, and alas, at present, we have no confidence in the Leader of the Opposition either. The Prime Minister knows full well that no majority can be manufactured in this place for her deal. Other than that, all she seems to know is how to play for time so that the eventual decision will, she hopes, go her way, but there is so little time left, and however much she pleads, her deal fails to command sufficient support.

Yesterday the Prime Minister conceded to my hon. Friend the Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) that it was in her power to seek to extend the article 50 period; President Tusk has said as much. Extending article 50 would give the Prime Minister more time to try to find a way out of this Brexit impasse, not through squeezing her friends but by reaching out across this House and across the countries of the UK so as to avoid the no deal that she herself admits would be disastrous for us. Yesterday, she refused to take that course. Could there be a clearer example of putting narrow party considerations before the pressing need to find a solution that will work for all the people of these islands?

Talking of the people outside this place, much has been made of the potential savings that Brexit would bring. We were told that there would be a bonanza, with billions of pounds to spend, apparently on the NHS. In the autumn of 2017, the Treasury earmarked £3 billion for Brexit, with £250 million in its back pocket in case of no deal. Yesterday, a further £2 billion was allocated to no-deal plans. Irrespective of all that, we know that a no-deal Brexit would wipe £5 billion off the Welsh economy, so the people of Wales, and people across these islands, must be told how much this Westminster Government are willing to spend to bring about the disaster of no deal.

Yesterday, the Leader of the Opposition threatened the Prime Minister with a vote of no confidence, something that only he has the power to do. However, when it came to it, panto came to Westminster at this Christmas time and he tabled his very own special motion of no consequence—[Laughter.] Thank you. If successful, it would at best only continue to prop up this shambolic Government, albeit with a different Prime Minister. It was nothing more than a pretence at opposition from the Leader of the Opposition while refusing to employ the power he actually has.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD)

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the reason the Leader of the Opposition did that was specifically to avoid having to make a decision about the people's vote?

Hywel Williams

The right hon. Gentleman makes a good point. The Leader of the Opposition has unfortunately painted himself into a corner. As happens so often in politics, particularly when in opposition, there are only bad choices, and he seems to be choosing the worst of them.

To conclude, Plaid Cymru and the other opposition parties have tabled an amendment to Labour's sham no-confidence motion to turn it into a real motion of no confidence in this shambolic Government. We will continue to work together and with others, wherever they are, to ensure that the people of these islands get the political leadership that they need and deserve.

16:01:00

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con)

It is a pleasure to be called in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams). I congratulate the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) on securing this debate. I always thought that it was relatively simple for an Opposition to get a coherent motion down and secure a debate in the Chamber, but we have seen over the past 24 hours that that seems to be a challenge for the Labour party.

I am not usually the sort of person who rushes to retweet the First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, but I did retweet her last night when she said that if it is only the Prime Minister in whom the Labour party does not have confidence, which Conservative Member is the Labour party looking forward to taking over? [Hon. Members: "You!"] Well, I hear Members say me, but I will be slightly modest and say that that is not really me, although I appreciate the comment. It could be the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Stephen Barclay), who just gave an excellent speech. This is about the absolute nonsense of the Labour party playing a parliamentary panto game when it should either have been making its view clear or moving on—I do not see the numbers in this House for a general election—and being honest.

I listened carefully and with some interest to the speech from the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer). He spent a lot of time dissecting no deal, saying that it would be disastrous and ruling it out as an option. He then spent a lot of time criticising the deal that is on the table, even though the leader of the Labour party spent the first half of his response to the Prime Minister's statement saying that there was really no point her negotiating because she was not going to get any other deal.

That brings me then to the only logical conclusion, which is that the preference of the right hon. and learned Gentleman is actually the one set out in the Bill presented earlier by the hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies): no Brexit at all. If that really is the policy of the right hon. and learned Gentleman, he should at least be up front about it. The Scottish National party has been clear about its preference for no Brexit, and I respect people when they are up front about what they think. I do not agree with that position, and it is not how my constituency voted. However, there were not many people who stood up before the referendum and said, "If this referendum goes the way that I do not like, I will disrespect it." In fact, the strongest argument for respecting the referendum result before it was known came from those who were planning to vote remain, not leave. For me, this is about being clear.

The substance of this motion is about the ongoing EU withdrawal negotiations, and I think it is right that the Prime Minister is getting on with the job that the people have asked her to do. There was an irony last week that a meeting with the Irish Government to talk about the backstop was cancelled due to the actions of those who demanded that the Prime Minister go to talk to the Irish Government

and European leaders about how the current wording on the backstop is unacceptable to many in this House.

For me, it is about being clear about the change we want to see. Extraneous issues—matters totally irrelevant to whether the border is kept open in Ireland, as all Members agree is important—could be used to veto future trading arrangements with the European Union, which would result in our staying in the backstop. None of us would think it is genuinely best endeavours if we ended up sitting in a backstop arrangement because, for example, a future Spanish Government did not think they had enough on Gibraltar or a future French President did not quite like the fishing agreement. The Northern Ireland backstop would not cover the common fisheries policy—I know the Scottish National party's enthusiasm for staying in the European Union's common fisheries policy—if we were forced into it.

We must make sure we can be confident that we will move forward and that there is not a return to the hard border of the past in Ireland. None of us wants to see the progress of the past 20 years undone, whatever view we take on Brexit. It is about being clear, which is why I welcome the fact that the Government are getting on with what this House asked them to do. It is bizarre for shadow Ministers to demand the vote now because they want to vote it down. Having the vote now would have been an argument if they wanted to vote it through, not vote it down. Such a vote would not move us forward.

Rather than playing games with procedural nonsense, it is time for the official Opposition finally to come clean on what their policies actually are. To be fair, the SNP and the Conservative party have, and it is for others to reflect over Christmas that there are choices to be made and it is time to make them, not to play procedural games.

16:06:00

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) not only on securing this timely and important debate but on his speech and on the way he conducted himself in the face of quite disgusting behaviour, frankly, from Conservative Members.

I thank Mr Speaker for granting the debate. It is fair to say that his leadership in the past few weeks has been in stark contrast to that of the leaders of the Conservative party and the Labour party.

The Prime Minister described people discussing the possibility of a second Brexit referendum as somehow betraying the first vote or as being a direct challenge to democracy. I might be wrong, but I cannot recall another Prime Minister suggesting that giving the people their say on a matter is anti-democratic.

What we are debating today is the real failure to honour that first referendum. This Prime Minister has had the job of delivering on that result, and she has chosen her own path, which looks certain to lead to defeat. It is therefore this Prime Minister who has failed to honour the referendum result, and she has failed because she has been too scared to take on her European Research Group extreme Brexiteers in case they submit letters of no confidence to challenge her leadership.

So unwilling has the Prime Minister been to have her Peel moment with her party that she boxed herself into a corner from which it has been impossible to extricate herself. She could have shown leadership and chosen other paths. As the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) rightly acknowledged, the Scottish Government offered a compromise position that many in her own party

think would have been passed by this House last year if it had been supported, and that was to remain in the single market and the customs union—the least-worst option on the table regarding Brexit.

Sadly, Labour’s leadership has been equally lacking. They have done nothing to be the real opposition to this Tory Government. They have taken the tactical decision to take no position, to offer no leadership, to do nothing and to wait to see what happens, which has clearly been in evidence over the last week. They are just as happy as this Government to kick the can down the road.

Labour does not really know what it wants to do with Brexit, and at every turn the Leader of the Opposition has, like the Prime Minister, looked at narrow party political advantage rather than work in the interest of all countries in these isles. It gives me no pleasure to say that, because there are some, such as the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) and others in the Labour party, who are doing what they can to shift the Labour leadership. But even in the narrow scope Labour are currently operating within, they have still failed in their objective by missing the opportunity to call a vote of no confidence last week when we asked them to work with us to do so.

I cannot think of a more inept and incompetent combination of Government and official Opposition, and at this time of crisis that is unforgivable. That is what is causing the

“irreparable damage to the integrity of our politics”—[Official Report, 17 December 2018; Vol. 651, c. 529.]

that the Prime Minister speaks of: an unwillingness of both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition to see beyond the end of their own noses. Rather than work with us last week to call a proper no confidence vote before the Tories held their own, Labour ignored us. The Prime Minister won that Tory vote and Labour lost the initiative. Even when Labour ended up belatedly tabling the no confidence motion last night, in a moment of absolute chaos in the leadership office and the Whips office, they still could not get it right, and it was left to the SNP, Plaid Cymru, the Lib Dems and the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) to make it meaningful and not just a poorly executed political stunt. Perhaps those sensible Labour MPs who remain might now look to our amendment, support it and put pressure on their leadership to finally step up to the mark. At this time of political crisis, the public are looking for leadership. The First Minister of Scotland has shown that leadership for the entirety of this Brexit process. Sadly both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition continue to compete to see who can be the most inept. Is it any wonder that the people of Scotland, in growing numbers, want their chance to choose a different path, one of which leads to Scottish independence?

16:11:00

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con)

It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray). I did not come into politics to talk about the European Union. I think I have spoken more about it in the past couple of weeks than I have in the past couple of years. I wish to start by praising the Prime Minister. I am certainly no sycophant, and I suspect she probably did not like the letter I sent her a couple of weeks ago, but she deserves huge praise and credit for the determination and perseverance she has displayed throughout these negotiations, securing a deal that many said could not be secured. She has won my respect and, I suspect, that of the nation for that tenacity.

My constituency was split on the same lines as the country in the referendum—52:48. I did not get involved in either campaign, because although I decided, on balance, to vote for Brexit, I am a democrat and I said that whatever the result was, I would respect it—I stand by that. The decision I have taken on the Brexit negotiations and the EU withdrawal agreement that was due to come before this House is that it is for every Member of the House to do their due diligence, look at every aspect of anything before us and vote on it accordingly. I see my role as being to review the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 and to come to a conclusion.

The deal has considerable merit and, apart from one element, I have little hesitation in offering it my full support. The hesitation comes in relation to the backstop. I have been clear about this in meetings with the Secretary of State, who has been hugely accommodating in listening to my concerns, the Attorney General—on more than one occasion—and the Prime Minister. I entirely understand and respect the Government's position that the backstop will almost certainly be an uncomfortable position for both the EU and the UK.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con)

The problem with the deal on the table is that it is neither fish, nor fowl. It satisfies neither the remainers, nor those people who wish to leave the EU, and because of that it falls down.

Will Quince

I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for that intervention, although I do not agree with him on this point. Inevitably, any negotiation on our exit from the EU was going to be a compromise. Most people are probably like me and are, on balance, one way or the other. Of course there are those who have strongly held views on both sides, remain and leave, but most people wanted a compromise that was mutually beneficial to both the EU and the UK, protecting jobs and businesses in this country—this deal largely does that.

It really is only the backstop that I have an issue with. As I say, I respect and understand the Government's position. It will most likely be an uncomfortable position if we enter the backstop, and I know that the Prime Minister certainly does not want us to be in that position and that she would use every endeavour to ensure that that does not happen. Were we to end up in the backstop, though, I am concerned that we would potentially be in an irrevocably weak position in respect of our future negotiating stance. The EU withdrawal agreement relates only to our exit from the European Union; we then have to go and negotiate the future trade agreement. I have concerns that, given our position in the backstop, we would not approach those negotiations from a position of power balance: there would be an imbalance.

I respect the Government's position, though, and very much hope that the Prime Minister is right. Sadly, two weeks ago I tendered my resignation as Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Secretary of State for Defence, but the Prime Minister has listened. She listened to the first few days of the debate on the withdrawal agreement and has understood the House's concerns, particularly in respect of the backstop, and gone back to the European Union—she was at the European Council last week and will continue those conversations—to raise our concerns and to try to seek a legally binding solution to the backstop. It is only right and proper that we give her the time necessary to secure the concessions that we in the House want to see. She not only deserves that but has earned it through her negotiating stance throughout the past two years.

On the motion in particular, I have some concern about how individual parties have conducted themselves. Let me turn first to the Scottish National party, which is at least consistent: it is quite clear that the SNP wants to overturn the 2016 referendum result. We can question whether that is democratic and in our national interest—

Angus Brendan MacNeil
Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Will Quince
I will in a moment.

We can question whether overturning the 2016 result is in Scotland's best interests, but at the very least the SNP is consistent. I am still none the wiser as to what the Labour party's position on Brexit is. We seem to get a different answer depending on which shadow Secretary of State answers the question.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con)

I do not believe the SNP is being consistent, because today it dropped a policy that it had been advocating for some time—namely, Norway plus. The SNP was asked directly about Norway plus and the First Minister and others have advanced the idea of Norway plus, but they have dropped it like a hot brick today. So they are not consistent. The only thing the SNP is consistent on—my hon. Friend is correct—is its obsession with independence and a second independence referendum.

Will Quince

I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention and bow to his knowledge of the political situation in Scotland.

Let me turn back to Labour. We get a different answer depending on which shadow Secretary of State is asked. I thought, perhaps naively, that the Labour party was against outsourcing, but it is absolutely clear that over the course of the past week Labour has outsourced all its opposition to the Scottish National party and is almost not even bothering. The dilly dallying over the confidence motion yesterday—what on earth was going on? The only thing in which we can have confidence is that the Labour party has absolutely no ability to offer effective opposition. Yesterday was like the no-confidence hokey cokey—it was verging on ridiculous. This House desperately needs far less political opportunism and far more honesty. At least we know where the SNP is coming from: it does not want Brexit to happen. What is the Labour party's position, other than wanting a general election?

Let me conclude, because I am conscious that I have only 30 seconds left. I am entirely pragmatic on this issue. I still want to support the EU withdrawal agreement and I very much hope to. Now that the Prime Minister has entered into these vital renegotiations on the backstop, she deserves our support. We need to send a clear message to the European Union that we stand behind her in seeking those concessions, particularly on the backstop. We have to stop playing politics with this issue and get behind her. I for one look forward to supporting the Prime Minister when she brings back concessions on the backstop in January.

16:19:00

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP)

This country is facing a grave political crisis the like of which we have not seen for more than a generation. The undeniable truth is that this is something that the Government have created for themselves. From the word go, they have chosen not to reach out across a divided country to try to build a political consensus on the question of our relationship with the European mainland. They have instead looked inward to the party of government, trying to patch over divisions within the Conservative party.

At least this latest insult by the Executive to the legislature in interrupting our debate on their proposals and denying us a vote on them this year is consistent. The Government have not suspended the process to fundamentally rethink their proposals and to listen to the concerns across this House. Oh, no—they are doing so only with a very narrow agenda, which is to placate the extreme right wing of their own party on its concerns about the Northern Ireland backstop. I have to say that the Northern Ireland backstop is, perhaps, the least offensive of the proposals before the House. Of far greater concern is the fact that, by the Government's own admission, they will impoverish the people whom we represent and deny people the ability to come and live and work in my country, which threatens its future prosperity.

In fact, the most offensive feature of the backstop is that it serves to underscore the duplicity of the Westminster Government when it comes to dealing with representations from Scotland. The national Parliament in Scotland has argued precisely for differential arrangements post Brexit and been told consistently for the past two years that they would be impossible because they would compromise the integrity of the United Kingdom, only to find them written down in this withdrawal agreement with regard to Northern Ireland. That is an insult, and it is contempt for the people of Scotland.

Let me turn to this question of the second referendum. I want to caution some colleagues who are against the notion about the language that they are using in this debate. It is a fantasy and a fiction to try to claim that, somehow, allowing all the people of this country to vote in a referendum is anti-democratic.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con)

In the Scottish Parliament today, the Cabinet Secretary for Government Business and Constitutional Relations was asked whether he would respect the result of a second referendum, and he would not answer. I therefore ask the hon. Gentleman: would he respect it?

Tommy Sheppard

I am consistent in respecting the results of every referendum. It is true that 17.4 million people voted to leave the European Union, but there are 65 million people in the United Kingdom, and at least 2 million of those 17 million have changed their minds. In a democracy, people have the right to change their mind. For people to oppose a second referendum and try to use an historic mandate, which is increasingly out of date, to suppress the democratic aspiration of the people in the here and now is more akin to authoritarian populism than to a liberal democracy. I urge colleagues not to go down that path in our dialogue.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op)

The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent point, but does he not agree that we have had two referendums on this, so this would be the third referendum in which people have been allowed a say about membership of the EU? We also had a referendum in Northern Ireland on the Good Friday agreement, which resulted in a 71% majority. Should not that referendum result be respected, which it is not in the Prime Minister's withdrawal agreement?

Tommy Sheppard

Let me explain it this way: we can never say that people do not have the right to reconsider a proposition in a democracy. On the other hand, we cannot have a referendum every month or every year, so we have to set tests for whether it is legitimate to have a second referendum. I would set three tests. First, the information on which the initial decision was taken needs to have substantially changed or to have been shown to be wrong—I think that test is met. Secondly, a significant

number of people have to have changed their minds—enough to create a different result. That test is met. The third test is whether the elected Parliament is incapable or unwilling of discharging the mandate from the referendum. When we get the chance to vote on it, that test, too, will have been met. It is now possible that having a people's referendum is actually the only way to get out of the current impasse and crisis.

Let me turn to the official Opposition. I am being completely non-sectarian. I do not just want to work with the Labour party in defeating this Government; I am desperate to do so. I am really concerned by what has happened over the last 24 hours. Earlier comments suggested that the miswording of Labour's no confidence motion to include "the Prime Minister" but not "the Government" is somehow a mistake or an ineptitude. It is not. It is a deliberate attempt not to put the question, so that it now languishes on the Order Paper with the same authority and effect as 1,900 early-day motions that are lying around.

I say to the Labour Front Benchers: you need to do something to dispel a growing concern, which is that Labour Members are not effectively taking on the Conservatives because they are not actually disagreeing with their policies all that much and would be quite content to see them go through. The Labour party needs to lead. It is the biggest Opposition party in this House. It needs to step up and co-ordinate the opposition on the Opposition Benches, but also on the Government Benches, and to defeat these proposals. Please do that and we will be your willing accomplice, if you ask us to be so.

There has been a lot of talk about the fact that Scotland, for the time being, remains part of the United Kingdom. I respect the 2014 referendum result. Scotland does remain part of the United Kingdom, and we have every right to argue in this Parliament for the benefit of our constituents within the United Kingdom, which is why we are desperately engaged in a process of trying to save this country from itself—from the worst act of collective self-harm in history—by stopping this ridiculous process of Brexit. But know this: we will not go down with the ship if it does not change direction. We will use our right of self-determination as a lifeboat to escape from this catastrophe. And when the time comes, if this process unfurls the way the Government want it to, you will be the greatest champions of Scottish independence, because the people of Scotland will take their opportunity to chart a different course and become a proper European nation at the heart of Europe.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing)

Order. The hon. Gentleman several times referred to "you", when he meant hon. Members, not the occupant of the Chair.

I now have to reduce the time limit to four minutes.

16:27:00

James Heappey (Wells) (Con)

It is a pleasure to follow the impassioned speech of the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard).

We are having an emergency debate on matters that are presumably of great importance and urgency, otherwise it would not be an emergency. Yet, having spoken in the Standing Order No. 24 debate roughly this time last week, one has to conclude that we seem to be having exactly the same discussion today as we had last week. It is therefore rather hard to understand exactly how this is an emergency. I suppose this debate was the insurance policy. One cannot blame SNP Members for seeking it, because I suspect they had their doubts about the ability of the Labour Front Benchers to put forward the motion that we thought we were all going to be debating today.

As I asked the Secretary of State earlier—he blushed and declined to answer—it is not quite clear whether it was the ineptitude or the invertebrateness of the Leader of the Opposition that led to the SNP motion being preferred over the official Opposition's. But here we are, effectively having exactly the same debate that we had last week—yet more time in which we are chewing over exactly the same issues as we have been for hour after hour over the recent weeks and months.

The Prime Minister and her Ministers have spent hours in this Chamber, taking questions at the Dispatch Box. The debate on the meaningful vote was three days in. I have to admit that I caught sight of the Whips' book while I sat near them during those three days, and every single line read, "Disagree". The mood of the House towards the deal as it stood then was absolutely obvious. Rather than proceeding to a meaningful vote last week when it was clear that the House was against it, we went away and sought something different, and when that was not immediately achieved in last week's summit, we said, "Okay, we'll give ourselves the Christmas period to push even harder and see if something different can be achieved." That seems to me to be a very rational, very sensible approach by a Prime Minister and a Government acting in the national interest.

Ian Blackford

The hon. Gentleman is making some important points. I suggest to him that the fact that Member after Member said that they disagreed with this deal, and that the European Union presidency has made it clear that it will not negotiate on it, means that we need to vote down this deal so that we can all come together to break the impasse. That is the point of this debate.

James Heappey

It is interesting logic to say that by voting down the deal we all somehow come together. As far as I can see, the deal is the best chance that we have—it is a very long shot, I grant you—at least of a majority in this House coming together in some sort of compromise.

If the deal is no longer available, we end up with no plan being offered by the Opposition; an outright—and, in fairness, unequivocal and consistent—opposition to Brexit from the right hon. Gentleman's party; the Liberal Democrats, who in my constituency seem to say one thing on the doorstep to one household and another to another—

Wera Hobhouse
indicated dissent.

James Heappey

I would gladly take an intervention from the hon. Lady if she could confirm today that the Liberal Democrats' official policy is an end to Brexit and that they would like to work with the Leader of the Opposition in government to bring that about.

Wera Hobhouse

I am happy to intervene. We have always said that our best place is in the European Union and that anybody who wants to work with us on that aim is very welcome.

James Heappey

I think that my constituents in Burnham-on-Sea, Cheddar, Shepton Mallet, Glastonbury, Street and Wells can see unequivocally from what the hon. Lady has just said that the Liberal Democrats are indeed seeking an exit from Brexit and would happily put the Leader of the Opposition into No. 10 to achieve that. That is somewhat at odds with what the Liberal Democrat candidate in my

constituency has been telling people. I am grateful to her for clarifying that in the short time that I have available to speak today.

I find that we are having these debates again and again and again. I did not come to Parliament to talk endlessly about Brexit, yet that is what we seem to be doing. I am not going to argue that a second referendum is undemocratic. I absolutely take the point made by the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard)—how can it be undemocratic to keep exercising democracy? However, I see a process that would take at least a year to deliver. If it took us 348 days to take the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill through this House, there is no way that a referendum Bill would take any less time. That means a year of huge uncertainty during which time Brexit would continue to dominate the national conversation, not in any way of trying to find compromise and a solution, but with people reverting back to the binary positions that dominated the original referendum debate.

A second referendum would be a step backwards, not a step forwards. It is not an end in itself. It is not a solution to the problems that we face in this place. It is simply us saying that we are not willing to make the decision ourselves and are putting in place a process whereby others can decide because we have not got the bottle to do so. We know what are the options in front of us, and we have to make the decision. A second referendum is a soft way out that solves nothing and does nothing other than create more parliamentary process and more dominance of the Brexit debate.

We have three choices: either no Brexit, which, in fairness, many Members in this House want; no deal, which many Members in this House also want; or the Prime Minister's deal, which at least means that we find a compromise and do not end up having to choose between two extremes.

16:33:00

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP)

I will start by trying to perform something of a Christmas miracle by striking a note of consensus for just a moment. I am sure that hon. Members from across the House would want to join me in marking International Migrants Day. [Hon. Members: "Hear, hear."] It was not that painful, then. It is a day for thanking our migrant family members, friends and neighbours for everything they have brought into our lives, and for committing ourselves to ensuring that all who have made this country their home can live full and happy lives, free from anti-migrant prejudice and discrimination.

In that spirit, I thought I would use my speech to take a slightly different tack and suggest how the Prime Minister might just be able to salvage one meaningful thing from ongoing talks with Brussels—something that could bring a bit of peace of mind to the 3 million EU migrant friends and colleagues we have here, as well as the 2 million or so British people living across the EU, and a way to save us from a completely wasted month. If the Prime Minister wants to do something meaningful that I think would have widespread support in the Chamber, she should seek to ring-fence the agreement on citizens' rights, so that even in the doomsday scenario of no deal on everything else, those rights would be protected. I do not for a minute think that that would be easy, and it might be that it cannot be done, but it is worth a try, because not trying means that all the 3 million have to rely on is a unilateral promise from the UK Government. Not trying also means that the British in Europe risk losing rights unless Governments in the 27 other member states each unilaterally pass legislation to replicate their status before April.

Of course, the Prime Minister says she has already committed to ensuring that EU nationals can remain here in the event of no deal—the Secretary of State and the Chair of the Exiting the European Union Committee referred to that earlier—but there are three problems with leaving it at

that. First, it is no help to the British in Europe. Secondly, the Government's published arrangements for EU nationals in the event of no deal are a watered-down version of the citizens' rights in the withdrawal agreement. Why is that? There is no justification for the difference in treatment. Thirdly, and most fundamentally, a unilateral promise from the Prime Minister can be here today and gone tomorrow. We have seen all sorts of Government promises ripped to shreds in recent weeks.

Even if the Prime Minister sticks to that commitment, it does not bind her successors. Those citizens' rights can be repealed in the blink of an eye, perhaps even through a change to the immigration rules. Who knows? We could end up with a Government daft enough to commit to reducing EU migration by something like 80%, if recent reports are in the right ballpark. It may be that a target-obsessed Prime Minister decides that the only way to meet that goal is to clamp down further on the family reunion rights of the 3 million.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP)
Hostile environment.

Stuart C. McDonald

Indeed. I sincerely hope that I am wrong, but we can well understand why a unilateral promise from the Prime Minister is not filling the 3 million with the sort of certainty that they would like.

For their sake, and for the sake of UK citizens in the EU, instead of frittering away these three weeks of further discussion in Brussels seeking assurances that will not make one bit of difference, the Prime Minister should use them to seek to ring-fence and guarantee at least the citizens' rights part of the deal. If she tries and fails, she will not get criticism from me, but if she does not try at all, she most certainly will, and she will also get criticism from the millions of EU and UK citizens living abroad who demand this peace of mind.

16:37:00

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con)

I want to begin on the theme of leadership and say how proud I was to stand as a Scottish Conservative and be elected to this Parliament under the leadership of our Prime Minister and Ruth Davidson. For my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, the Union is an enduring principle. For many, support for the Union is perfunctory, but she genuinely believes in the Union. She knows that the strength of this country lies in its unity, and when she speaks of our precious Union, she means it.

The SNP are at it—more political games and more procedural devices, and to what end? To the only end that nationalists have any interest in: the break-up of the United Kingdom. Instead of discussing the substance of things, they obsess over process while nursing grievance. What they should be doing is putting the interests of our country and our constituents ahead of their narrow party political agenda.

The SNP do not accept the result of the 2016 referendum. That is not a novel position for them. They have a problem with accepting any referendum result when they do not win, which is always. They are blatant. They want to overturn the votes of 33 million people. Of course, my constituency voted 67% to remain in the European Union. If my constituents had been the sole electorate voting, we would still be in the European Union, but this was a United Kingdom vote on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union, and the voice of the people was clear. The people's instruction was that we should leave the European Union. Should this House fail to fulfil that

instruction, it would be an abrogation of our responsibility as Members of this House to respect democracy and the verdict of the British people.

The people of Stirling elected me to this House on the back of my election commitment to make the best of Brexit: to return powers to our country from Brussels and to grow our economy—the free enterprise economy—which has produced a jobs miracle since 2010 and will continue to do so. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is carrying out the will of the electorate. She is acting in good faith and with respect for the instruction of the British people. The people were told their decision would be carried out.

Let us not forget who we are dealing with—the Scottish nationalists. They have only one objective today, which is the objective they always have. They want to break up the United Kingdom at all costs. From the break of dawn on the morning after the EU referendum, Nicola Sturgeon has focused solely on the second independence referendum. The people of Scotland, who are now bearing the heaviest tax burden in any part of the United Kingdom and living with the failures of an 11-year-old SNP Administration, can see through all the posturing and faux rage. The SNP's theatrics today may satisfy the appetites of their core supporters, but the people of Stirling want none of it. They want improvements in their schools, their NHS and their police service, and they want policies to tackle antisocial behaviour and to improve the quality of their lives and the life chances of their children, not this pantomime.

16:41:00

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP)

It is always a delight to follow the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr). I can reveal that his speeches are watched with great excitement in SNP headquarters, where the single question is: how many more phone lines will we have to open for people wanting to join the SNP?

Looking back to April 2017, immediately after article 50 was triggered, we knew that for two years nothing very much would change, but nobody really knew what would happen after that—that depended on the outcome of the negotiations. In December 2018, we know that during a two-year implementation period nothing much is going to change, but nobody has any idea what will happen after that. So after two or two and a half years of the greatest efforts by the brightest buttons in the Tory box, we are no further forward than we were in April 2017. All they have done is bring back and order us—not ask us, but order us—to support a deal, every single aspect of which is immeasurably worse than the deal that we already have and the deal that our nation overwhelmingly voted to retain.

Yesterday, without a hint of irony, the Prime Minister warned about damaging the integrity of our democracy. This from a Prime Minister who broke her promise not to call a snap election and broke her promise to give Parliament a vote last week, and from a party that allowed two self-confessed gross misconduct MPs back in just to let them vote in a leadership contest and a Government who are the first in history to be in contempt of Parliament. If the Government are worried about a loss of trust in the integrity of our politics, I suggest they get themselves a very large mirror and spend some time in front of it. If they want to know about the millions of people who are wondering whether this façade of a democracy is ever going to deliver, they should not only speak to but listen to some of the 62% in Scotland who voted to remain with the deal we already have, or indeed to some of the 71% in Northern Ireland who voted for a peace process that, right now, is not guaranteed under Brexit and which, even if the Prime Minister's deal is accepted, still will not have a guaranteed long-term future.

The Prime Minister claims to have listened to Parliament. She has listened to Parliament in the way that a defence lawyer listens to the case for the prosecution: absolutely no prospect of her budging an inch from her position, but listening for potential clues as to how she can impose her will on everyone else. Yesterday, she told us that this was not about expressing our personal views, saying that

“expressing our personal views is not what we are here to do.”—[Official Report, 17 December 2018; Vol. 651, c. 528.]

In response to 23 different Members of Parliament, she then expressed her personal views about what was right and what was wrong. So when the Prime Minister says that we are not here to express our personal views, what she really means is that we are here to listen to her personal views and then do what we are told, regardless of what 649 other Members of Parliament and 60 million other people may think is best. That is not a parliamentary democracy; that is an elected dictatorship. When the word “elected” refers to a Prime Minister without a parliamentary majority, without the confidence of a third of her own MPs, and opposed by nearly 58% of those who voted in 2017, that elected dictatorship becomes dangerously close to an unelected dictatorship.

Had the Prime Minister not run away from debate last week, we would have been discussing the Union for eight hours on Tuesday. The question for Scotland is, which Union? The day is fast approaching when the people of Scotland will be asked whether they want a Union that is a true partnership of equals, such as is enjoyed by our friends in Ireland, or a so-called partnership of equals, which even today has demonstrably treated our nation and our nation’s elected representatives with absolute contempt. When that question is asked, and it will be asked very soon, the answer from the sovereign citizens of Scotland will be as emphatic and as final as it is inevitable.

16:45:00

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con)

It is always a pleasure to follow the singular wit of the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant).

Today, we have heard some fantastic words from the SNP; it has all been about humiliation, embarrassment and betrayal. Well, it is not this House that has driven education in Scotland down and has Scotland tumbling down the international rankings; it is not this House that has us failing our young people and their mental health targets; it is not this House that has us losing 150,000 further education college places; and it is not this House that has our farmers being left out of the UK’s Agriculture Bill, betrayed by the SNP. The only betrayal, humiliation and embarrassment is on the SNP Benches, not the Conservative Benches. I wanted to be very clear about that.

We have talked a lot today about uncertainty, and when we talk about uncertainty in this Chamber, it is a real concern. I spoke to a developer in my constituency because a project was behind schedule. I asked why he was struggling, and one of the key reasons he gave, in front of other elected Members who were present, was that the uncertainty posed by *indyref2* meant he was unable to get proper funding for the project to progress.

That undermines the SNP’s whole argument about why it cares so much about Unions. I have heard its members talk about the strength of Union, the feeling of camaraderie and the fact that we can achieve so much more together than we can apart. Why is it, then, that they want to remain part of the EU but break our own United Kingdom? It is not rational, it is not logical—it is just plain, hard nationalism. That is divisive; it is the scar that divides our communities.

Angus Brendan MacNeil

The hon. Gentleman complains about the uncertainty over indyref2, as he puts it. The best way to end that uncertainty is to have a referendum and let the Scottish people speak. He is afraid of that.

Luke Graham

As I have shown in every debate, I am never afraid to face the hon. Gentleman. What is clear is that the SNP will not necessarily accept the result of that referendum. They did not accept the result in 2014, they are not accepting the result in 2016, so they certainly will not accept the 2018 result.

I am concerned that the SNP is inadvertently misleading the people of Scotland by telling them that they will be worse off leaving the EU versus leaving the United Kingdom, when we have four times the trade and far more social and cultural connectivity than we do with our European partners.

I will be honest: I campaigned for remain, and I came to this House because I wanted to talk about more Unions, not fewer; I wanted to talk about more international co-operation, not less. The strain that has been seen among my hon. Friends, and that has tested many Labour Members too, relates to the question of how we can progress as a country. We passed the power to the people, and a democratic decision has been made, which needs to be honoured, lest we undermine the democratic mandate we gave the people. I am not in the habit of defying the results of referendums, even though the SNP, as I said, did not respect the 2014 result and do not respect the 2016 result. We must respect the result. The two referendums we have had in the last few years have not brought our country closer together or sealed any rifts; they have actually kept the wounds open and kept them fresh. We have to use this House to bring people together, to come up with ideas and to chart a way forward.

The Prime Minister's speech—[Interruption.] If Members want intervene, they should intervene; if not, they should pipe down. When it comes to the Prime Minister's deal and the economic analysis that goes with it, one of the key reasons why I am minded to support that deal is that the economic impact on the growth for Scotland would be zero—that is on page 63 of the economic analysis that has been issued for everyone to read and observe.

Stephen Kerr

The reality is that the businesses and farmers in my constituency, as in my hon. Friend's constituency, are saying to us, "Stop playing politics. Get behind the Prime Minister and pass this agreement."

Luke Graham

This is the point we are getting to: it is just becoming petty party politics. Opposition MPs say, "We want access to the single market." The deal on the table gives us access to the single market. They say, "We want a customs arrangement." The deal on the table gives us a customs arrangement. There are some compromises on goods and freedom. I know colleagues in all parts of the House who want a different kind of Brexit disagree with that, but there elements of compromise on all sides. That is why we need to work together. SNP Members make great play of saying that they want to reach across the aisle. I may be just a humble Back Bencher, but as someone who actively campaigned for remain, not one SNP Member has ever approached me to try to work together to come up with a better plan or find some clever new initiative. If they want real cross-party working, then they should not use words but take action. That is what our constituents want to see and it is seriously lacking from those on the SNP Benches.

No deal is perfect. The forces facing people in this House are a choice between hard socialism, hard nationalism and a decent compromise from the Government Benches. That is what I am advocating from these Benches. That is what I will be supporting. I hope hon. Members will support me in that, too.

16:51:00

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)

Mr Deputy Speaker, how do you follow someone who is speaking in a different debate from everybody else?

This entire process has from the start been one long con job. The EU withdrawal agreement is a complete fudge. The Prime Minister's visit to Brussels for concessions on the backstop is proof that she, like the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham), lives in a parallel universe. It is absolutely obvious that nothing was gained, and it is obvious that her deal still cannot get through Parliament. It is a damning indictment when an EU diplomat labels the Prime Minister unprofessional and conclusions are changed in frustration at her attitude. It is little wonder that her Ministers are now coming up with alternatives while she has her head in the sand.

The current failures reflect a failed strategy from a Government that she was part of from the outset. The voting franchise was a con. It is an absolute disgrace that EU citizens living here and paying taxes were excluded along with 16 and 17-year-olds. These cohorts would have changed the outcome of the vote and we would not be in the mess we are currently in. Then we had the Vote Leave lies, an organisation whose chair is still a Secretary of State in this Government. We had the Cambridge Analytica scandal and the confirmation of dark money, which the Tories are up to their necks in. The con job goes all the way back to 2014, when the Better Together campaign told Scotland that the only way to retain EU membership was to vote no in that referendum.

The reality is that EU citizens, including my wife in Scotland, are worried about their future, despite any hollow reassurances from the UK Government. I do not want freedom of movement to end, even though that pledge itself is another con trick. Article 5 of the Ireland-Northern Ireland protocol states that within the common travel area there will be

“free movement for Union citizens and their family members, irrespective of their nationality, to, from and within Ireland.”

There it is in black and white: freedom of movement to Northern Ireland will continue. Therefore, the only way to resolve freedom of movement to Great Britain is a border in the Irish sea. According to the Prime Minister the backstop is the only issue, but there are so many aspects that have been kicked into the long grass that still need to be resolved to avoid the backstop arising—key matters that the Prime Minister should resolve, but pretends do not exist.

Just last night, the Tories refused to take an amendment to the Fisheries Bill that would see the end of the common fisheries policy by 31 December 2020. The Fisheries Minister admitted that there might need to be an extension of the transition period, so what is there to stop another sell-out of the fishermen? Worse, the Fisheries Minister had to correct the record to confirm that under the backstop Northern Ireland will have tariff-free access to the EU, whereas Great Britain will not. What is the Prime Minister doing to resolve that competitive disadvantage for Scottish fishermen?

Drew Hendry

My hon. Friend is making a very important contribution. Is it not a fact that the Tories have always seen Scottish fishing as dispensable? In fact, that was actually Government policy when they entered the CFP.

Alan Brown

Absolutely. That is an historical fact. We only had to see the dynamics in the Fisheries Bill Committee last night. The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) tabled an amendment which he said was only a probing amendment and he then voted against leaving the CFP on 31 December 2020.

All these things are proof that the Prime Minister's red lines were a con as well, as was the Scottish Secretary's threat to resign if Northern Ireland was given special status. The Scottish Secretary has refused to even look at the compromises suggested by the Scottish Government. It really is time for the UK Government to acknowledge that for any deal to get through this Parliament, it will have to include the single market and the customs union—something that is more likely to appeal to the EU than further UK demands for concessions.

After two years of our being told that no deal is better than a bad deal, we are now suddenly told, "No deal would be a disaster—but don't worry about a disaster, because we are planning for it! We are putting arrangements in place." We have had a Brexit Secretary who did not know how important Dover was, and the Transport Secretary did not visit Dover until October 2018. The Transport Secretary also promised that there would be an aviation deal, and then two years later admitted that discussions had not even begun on the aviation agreement. That is how much of a con this Government's no-deal preparations are—they are an absolute joke.

It is not a binary choice between a bad deal and no deal. The European Court of Justice ruling means that MPs can revoke article 50. As other hon. Members have said, we need to seriously consider a people's vote. In Scotland, as new polls show, independence within the EU is preferable to Scotland being dragged out against its will. It is quite clear that we need our own independence referendum to let the people of Scotland decide our future.

16:56:00

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con)

I just want to make some brief points, and I will endeavour not to be nebulous. I did not vote for Brexit. I would rather not be where we are, but people were given the choice and we told them that their choice counted, so we are where we are. No deal is not attractive, nor is trying to trade on WTO terms alone. It is especially not attractive for financial services, security co-operation, the digital sector, science and research, and for advanced manufacturing.

The declaration on the future framework offers the pathway for the deepest free trade agreement and the deepest security partnership ever offered by the EU to a non-EU country. It has been agreed unanimously by the Heads of State of 27 EU countries. Five of those Heads of State are Prime Ministers from sister parties of the UK Labour party. Seven of the Prime Ministers are from sister parties of the UK Liberal Democrat party. Last Friday, those same 27 Heads of State made it clear again that they intend to honour that declaration and that they are ready to start the detailed negotiations. Suggesting that the declaration on the future partnership is somehow not meaningful insults the integrity of those 27 other Heads of State.

Furthermore, the withdrawal agreement and the future framework agreement follow the principles that have been supported in numerous resolutions in the European Parliament—in April, October

and December 2017, and again in March this year. Those resolutions were all supported by the Members of the European Parliament from the Scottish National party, so I say to the SNP: if you want to avoid leaving with no deal, the best thing to do is to vote for this deal. And I say to the Opposition: if you want to have a motion of no confidence in the Government, table a motion of no confidence in the Government. It is that simple.

16:58:00

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD)

As people say, a week is a long time in politics, and today we find ourselves talking about Scottish independence when we were meant to be having a European Union withdrawal debate. One thing that I must say about the debate today is that I believe we are better together in the European Union and in the United Kingdom.

Delaying the vote that should have taken place last week was deeply irresponsible. It is obviously the Prime Minister's aim to blackmail MPs by saying that other than her deal, there is only a no-deal Brexit. This is playing Russian roulette. The Prime Minister has repeatedly refused to consider any other options. Parliament is now at an impasse. There is currently no majority either for the Prime Minister's deal or a no-deal Brexit, and in this House we cannot cancel Brexit. The 2016 referendum has taken place and we have to recognise that. However, that does not mean that the result should not have to be looked at again for generations to come. As Parliament cannot agree on a specific Brexit plan, we must take the issue back to the people—including, when we look at the Brexit reality rather than the Brexit fantasy, the question of whether we should stay in the EU. I see nothing condescending to leave voters in that proposal. There is nothing stupid about reconsidering such an enormous issue, and reaching a new conclusion in the light of new information or new facts.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP)

The hon. Lady is making a powerful point. She is right that people should have the opportunity to look at the issue again. Given that the United Kingdom for which people in Scotland voted in 2014 no longer exists, why is her party opposed to a second referendum on Scottish independence?

Wera Hobhouse

As I said earlier, today we are talking about EU membership. [Interruption.] The Liberal Democrats believe in the Union of the United Kingdom. [Interruption.] I believe that it is a sign of integrity and intelligence to reconsider a referendum result—and by all means let the Scottish people have another look at that decision. [Interruption.] If people want to confirm their previous decision, that is absolutely fine by me as well. I believe that there is nothing undemocratic about asking for confirmation or clarification. It is clear that leave voters were split when they voted to leave. There are those who were happy to leave the EU without a deal and who now feel betrayed by the Prime Minister's deal, and there are those who are happy to support it. The current divisions are most profound among those two camps.

Referendums need not be divisive. They only become so when promises are made that cannot be delivered. The 2016 referendum was divisive because promises were made that could not be delivered. Now Brexit fantasies are hitting Brexit realities. It is therefore not inherently the fault of the Prime Minister that a bad deal was negotiated. Frankly, no other Prime Minister would have been able to reconcile the incompatible demands of the Brexit vote. There is no good Brexit deal. Parliament knows that, and it is right to vote down the Prime Minister's deal.

The most democratic thing to do now is to return the question to the people, but this time a referendum should be based on facts and not on fantasies. The Prime Minister should stop being afraid of democracy, allow her vote to take place this week, and allow Parliament to do its job and move forward to a people's vote.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle)

I call Patrick Grady to speak very briefly.

17:02:00

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP)

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am very grateful to have caught your eye, and I will be very brief.

In 2015, the Scottish National party released the speech that Alex Salmond would have given if Scotland has voted yes to independence. If we had won the referendum in 2014, we would have embarked on a programme of nation building, of ambition, of progression and of bringing everyone together, recognising that not everyone would have voted in favour of independence, and recognising and reaching out to the people who voted no.

How that contrasts with what the Prime Minister did in 2016 and what she has done since. She has pandered to the hardest and most extreme Brexiteers on her own Benches instead of trying to bring the rest of the United Kingdom together. That is the legacy with which we have been left today, that is why we have found ourselves in the current farce and impasse, and that is why the deal that the Prime Minister has proposed is unacceptable to everyone and the no-deal contingency planning has had to be stepped up. It turns out that rather than getting £350 million a week for the NHS, we will have 3,500 troops on the streets. No one in the United Kingdom voted for that to happen as a consequence of Brexit, yet that is exactly what we are seeing.

However, the real story of the past few days has not been the contemptible failure on the Conservative Benches—we have known about their chaos for a very long time—but the failure on the part of the Labour party and the Leader of the Opposition, who should have taken his constitutional responsibility seriously and tabled a motion of no confidence in Her Majesty's Government. He is the man who should be the credible alternative in this House, and he has singularly failed to be that. That is because the Labour party is the pro-Brexit Labour party and the leader of the Labour party is the pro-Brexit leader of the Labour party, and that is a betrayal of the people the Labour party is supposed to represent.

It is true that hard-core Labour voters voted leave in 2016, but the job of the Labour party should not simply be to kowtow and run away in fear; it should remake and remake again the positive case for European membership rather than support a Brexit that is going to put those very people out of work and make them less well off.

That may be difficult for the Labour voters in the north of England, but the voters in Scotland have an alternative. The voters in Scotland have a way out: if we want to exit from Brexit, we can do that by exiting the United Kingdom.

17:05:00

Ian Blackford

I am grateful for the opportunity to have held this debate today and I thank all Members who have contributed to it.

It is clear that Members across this Chamber have significant concerns about the challenges that lay ahead of us. What is even clearer is that, sadly, this Government will dig their heels in regardless of what lays ahead. It has been acknowledged across this House that we have reached a moment in history when Parliament has been systematically undermined by a Government out of control, and when the public have been let down by a Tory party so divided and distracted by its own infighting that it has no regard for the interests of citizens across the UK.

Let me be clear and repeat a comment that has been made by several Members: there is no good Brexit. Our economy will be smaller, our people poorer and the opportunities for future generations limited as opposed to what would be the case staying in the EU. That is borne out by the UK Government's analysis.

It is an utter travesty that today the Prime Minister chose to sit out this debate, despite the importance of its substance. That is not good enough, and it shows the contempt that the Prime Minister has for the motion granted by the Speaker. Maybe it is the case that the Prime Minister should sit out the rest of the debate on Brexit. She and her Government should stand aside and let the people sort out this mess. Let the will of the people be heard. Let us have a second EU referendum so that we can allow those who have changed their minds, now that they have the facts, to end this crisis and chaos. As democrats, we should have nothing to fear.

We have always made it clear that we would support permanent, continued membership of the single market and the customs union—short of the best option of staying in the EU, that remains our position. The SNP set out our position in “Scotland's place in Europe” and we have been entirely consistent throughout. However, the reality is, based on the publicly stated position of the other parties in the Commons, that there does not currently appear to be majority support for that option of staying in the single market and the customs union. Therefore, with the EU exit date of 29 March fast approaching and the UK Government in chaos, the urgent priority now is to stop the clock on this disastrous Brexit process by extending article 50. That allows time for options, including another EU referendum, or indeed the Norway option if enough support emerges for it.

Let me clarify that it has always been the case that the SNP's first option, in line with the wishes of the people of Scotland, is to retain EU membership. A second referendum would be an opportunity to stay in the EU, and with the clock ticking down to 29 March, that is the focus of our efforts.

Compromise options should always remain on the table, but, frankly, we need to be realistic. The opportunity for votes and for debate is narrowing, with the Government denying Parliament and the people a say. It is time for this Government to go. Voices from many in this Chamber have made it clear that they agree with the SNP. This Government are a disgrace. This Government have shown contempt for Parliament; it is a farce. I say again to the Leader of the Opposition—

17:09:00

Three hours having elapsed since the start of proceedings, the motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 24).