

HOUSE OF COMMONS HANSARD

Leaving the European Union

26 February 2019

Leaving the European Union

12:36:00

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May)

With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the Government's work to secure a withdrawal agreement that can command the support of this House.

A fortnight ago, I committed to come back before the House today if the Government had not by now secured a majority for a withdrawal agreement and a political declaration. In the two weeks since, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the Attorney General and I have been engaging in focused discussions with the EU to find a way forward that will work for both sides. We are making good progress in that work. I had a constructive meeting with President Juncker in Brussels last week to take stock of the work done by our respective teams. We discussed the legal changes that are required to guarantee that the Northern Ireland backstop cannot endure indefinitely.

On the political declaration, we discussed what additions or changes can be made to increase confidence in the focus and ambition of both sides in delivering the future partnership we envisage as soon as possible, and the Secretary of State is following this up with Michel Barnier.

I also had a number of positive meetings at the EU-Arab League summit in Sharm el-Sheikh, including with President Donald Tusk. I have now spoken to the leaders of every single EU member state to explain the UK's position. And the UK and EU teams are continuing their work, and we agreed to review progress again in the coming days.

As part of these discussions, the UK and EU have agreed to consider a joint workstream to develop alternative arrangements to ensure the absence of a hard border in Northern Ireland. This work will be done in parallel with the future relationship negotiations and is without prejudice to them. Our aim is to ensure that, even if the full future relationship is not in place by the end of the implementation period, the backstop is not needed because we have a set of alternative arrangements ready to go. I thank my hon. and right hon. Friends for their contribution to this work and reaffirm that we are seized of the need to progress that work as quickly as possible.

President Juncker has already agreed that the EU will give priority to this work, and the Government expect that this will be an important strand of the next phase. The Secretary of State for Exiting the EU will be having further discussions with Michel Barnier and we will announce details ahead of the meaningful vote. We will also be setting up domestic structures to support this work, including ensuring that we can take advice from external experts involved in customs processes around the world from businesses that trade with the EU and beyond—and, of course, from colleagues across the House. This will all be supported by civil service resource as well as funding for the Government to help develop, test and pilot proposals that can form part of these alternative arrangements.

I know what this House needs in order to support a withdrawal agreement. The EU knows what is needed, and I am working hard to deliver it. As well as changes to the backstop, we are also working across a number of other areas to build support for the withdrawal agreement and to give the House confidence in the future relationship that the UK and EU will go on to negotiate. This includes ensuring that leaving the EU will not lead to any lowering of standards in relation to workers' rights, environmental protections or health and safety. Taking back control cannot mean giving up our control of these standards, especially when UK Governments of all parties have proudly pursued policies that exceed the minimums set by the EU, from Labour giving British workers more annual leave to the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats giving all employees the right to request flexible working. Not only would giving up control go against the spirit of the referendum result—it would also mean accepting new EU laws automatically, even if they were to reduce workers' rights or change them in a way that was not right for us.

Instead, and in the interests of building support across the House, we are prepared to commit to giving Parliament a vote on whether it wishes to follow suit whenever the EU standards in areas such as workers' rights and health and safety are judged to have been strengthened. The Government will consult with businesses and trade unions as it looks at new EU legislation and decides how the UK should respond. We will legislate to give our commitments on both non-regression and future developments force in UK law. And following further cross-party talks, we will shortly be bringing forward detailed proposals to ensure that, as we leave the EU, we not only protect workers' rights but continue to enhance them.

As the Government committed to the House last week, we are today publishing the paper assessing our readiness for no deal. I believe that if we have to, we will ultimately make a success of a no deal. But this paper provides an honest assessment of the very serious challenges it would bring in the short term and further reinforces why the best way for this House to honour the referendum result is to leave with a deal.

As I committed to the House, the Government will today table an amendable motion for debate tomorrow. But I know Members across the House are genuinely worried that time is running out—that if the Government do not come back with a further meaningful vote, or they lose that vote, Parliament will not have time to make its voice heard on the next steps. I know too that Members across the House are deeply concerned by the effect of the current uncertainty on businesses. So today I want to reassure the House by making three further commitments. First, we will hold a second meaningful vote by Tuesday 12 March at the latest. Secondly, if the Government have not won a meaningful vote by Tuesday 12 March, then they will, in addition to their obligations to table a neutral, amendable motion under section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, table a motion to be voted on by Wednesday 13 March, at the latest, asking this House if it supports leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement and a framework for a future relationship on 29 March. So the United Kingdom will only leave without a deal on 29 March if there is explicit consent in this House for that outcome.

Thirdly, if the House, having rejected leaving with the deal negotiated with the EU, then rejects leaving on 29 March without a withdrawal agreement and future framework, the Government will, on 14 March, bring forward a motion on whether Parliament wants to seek a short, limited extension to article 50, and, if the House votes for an extension, seek to agree that extension approved by the House with the EU and bring forward the necessary legislation to change the exit date commensurate with that extension. These commitments all fit the timescale set out in the private Member's Bill in the name of the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). They are commitments I am making as Prime Minister, and I will stick

by them, as I have previous commitments to make statements and table amendable motions by specific dates.

But let me be clear—I do not want to see article 50 extended. Our absolute focus should be on working to get a deal and leaving on 29 March. An extension beyond the end of June would mean the UK taking part in the European Parliament elections. What kind of message would that send to the more than 17 million people who voted to leave the EU nearly three years ago now? And the House should be clear that a short extension—not beyond the end of June—would almost certainly have to be a one-off. If we had not taken part in the European Parliament elections, it would be extremely difficult to extend again, so it would create a much sharper cliff edge in a few months' time. An extension cannot take no deal off the table. The only way to do that is to revoke article 50, which I shall not do, or to agree a deal. I have been clear throughout the process that my aim is to bring the country back together. This House—[Interruption.] This House can only do that by implementing the decision of the British people, and the Government are determined to do so in a way that commands the support of this House.

But just as Government require the support of this House in delivering the vote of the British people, so the House should respect the proper functions of the Government. Tying the Government's hands by seeking to commandeer the Order Paper would have—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker

Order. This is rather discourteous. The Prime Minister is delivering a statement, and it should be heard. I understand the strong feelings, but colleagues know from the record that everybody will get the chance to question the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister's statement must be heard.

The Prime Minister

Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Tying the Government's hands by seeking to commandeer the Order Paper would have far-reaching implications for the way in which the United Kingdom is governed and the balance of powers and responsibilities in our democratic institutions, and it would offer no solution to the challenge of finding a deal that this House can support. Neither would seeking an extension to article 50 now make getting a deal any easier. Ultimately the choices we face would remain unchanged: leave with a deal, leave with no deal, or have no Brexit. When it comes to the motion tomorrow, the House needs to come together, as we did on 29 January, and send a clear message that there is a stable majority in favour of leaving the EU with a deal.

A number of hon. and right hon. Members have understandably raised the rights of EU citizens living in the UK. As I set out last September, following the Salzburg summit, even in the event of no deal, the rights of the 3 million EU citizens living in the UK will be protected. That is our guarantee to them. They are our friends, our neighbours and our colleagues. We want them to stay. But a separate agreement for citizens' rights is something the EU has been clear it does not have the legal authority for. If it is not done in a withdrawal agreement, these issues become a matter for member states, unless the EU was to agree a new mandate to take that forward.

At the very start of this process, the UK sought to separate out that issue, but the EU has been consistent on it. However, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has written to all his counterparts, and we are holding further urgent discussions with member states to seek assurances on the rights of UK citizens. I urge all EU countries to make this guarantee and end the uncertainty for these citizens. I hope that the Government's efforts can give the House and EU citizens here in the UK the reassurances they need and deserve.

For some hon. and right hon. Members, taking the United Kingdom out of the European Union is the culmination of a long and sincerely fought campaign. For others, leaving the EU goes against much that they have stood for and fought for with equal sincerity for just as long. But Parliament gave the choice to the people. In doing so, we told them that we would honour their decision. That remains the resolve of this side of the House, but last night we learned that it is no longer the commitment of the Leader of the Opposition. He has gone back on his promise to respect the referendum result and now wants to hold a divisive second referendum that would take our country right back to square one. Anybody who voted Labour at the last election because they thought he would deliver Brexit will rightly be appalled.

This House voted to trigger article 50, and this House has a responsibility to deliver on the result. The very credibility of our democracy is at stake. By leaving the EU with a deal, we can move our country forward. Even with the uncertainty we face today, we have more people in work than ever before, wages growing at their fastest rate for a decade and debt falling as a share of the economy. If we can leave with a deal, end the uncertainty and move on beyond Brexit, we can do so much more to deliver real economic progress to every part of country.

I hope tomorrow this House can show that, with legally binding changes on the backstop, commitments to protect workers' rights and the environment, an enhanced role for Parliament in the next phase of negotiations and a determination to address the wider concerns of those who voted to leave, we will have a deal that this House can support. In doing so, we can send a clear message that this House is resolved to honour the result of the referendum and leave the European Union with a deal. I commend this statement to the House.

12:50:00

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab)

I would like to start by thanking the Prime Minister for an advance copy of her statement.

I have lost count of the number of times the Prime Minister has come to this House to explain a further delay. They say history repeats itself—the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce—but by the umpteenth time it can only be described as grotesquely reckless. This is not dithering; it is a deliberate strategy to run down the clock. The Prime Minister is promising to achieve something she knows is not achievable and is stringing people along, so will she be straight with people? The withdrawal agreement is not being reopened. There is no attempt to get a unilateral exit on the backstop or a time limit.

In Sharm el-Sheikh, the Prime Minister said that

“a delay in this process, doesn't deliver a decision in parliament, it doesn't deliver a deal”.

I can only assume she was being self-critical. She has so far promised a vote on her deal in December, January, February and now March, and she only managed to put a vote once—in January, when it was comprehensively defeated. The Prime Minister continues to say that it is her deal or no deal, but this House has decisively rejected her deal and has clearly rejected no deal. It is the Prime Minister's obstinacy that is blocking a resolution, so if the House confirms that opposition, then what is the Prime Minister's plan B?

I pay tribute to others across the House who are working on such solutions—whether that is the proposal that is commonly known as Norway-plus or other options. Labour, I would like to inform

the House, will back the Costa amendment if tabled tomorrow, and I also confirm that we will back the amendment drafted by the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) on securing citizens' rights for EU citizens here and for UK citizens in Europe, some of whom I met in Spain last week.

The Prime Minister has become quite the expert at kicking the can down the road, but the problem is that the road is running out. The consequences of running down the clock are evident and very real for industry and for people's jobs. For now, the Prime Minister states that the can can be kicked until 12 March, but the EU cannot now ratify any deal until its leaders summit on 21 March. After all, section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act states that the final agreement will be laid before this House before it can be voted on, so can the Prime Minister confirm how there can be a vote in this House if the EU has not yet agreed any final exit, or is the Prime Minister now saying that there will be no change to either the withdrawal agreement or to the political declaration, so we will be voting again on the same documents?

Every delay and every bit of badly made fudge just intensifies the uncertainty for industry, with business investment being held back, jobs being lost and yet more jobs being putting at risk. The real life consequences of the Prime Minister's cynical tactics are being felt across the country, with factories relocating abroad, jobs being lost and investment being cancelled. Thousands of workers at sites across Britain's towns and cities are hearing rumours and fearing the worst. The responsibility for this lies exclusively with the Prime Minister and her Government's shambolic handling of Brexit. Even now, with just one month to go before our legally enshrined exit date, the Prime Minister is not clear what she wants in renegotiations that have now dragged on since it became clear in December that her deal was not even backed by much of her own party, let alone Parliament or the country at large.

Labour has a credible plan—[Interruption.] Labour has a credible plan that could bring the country together, provide certainty for people, and safeguard jobs and industry. It is based around a new customs union with the EU to protect our manufacturing industry, close alignment with the single market to protect all of our trading sectors and keeping pace with the best practice on workers' rights, environmental protections and consumer safeguards. The people of this country deserve nothing less. The Prime Minister talks about giving commitments on future developments, but that is way short of a commitment to dynamic alignments on rights and standards when we know many on her Front Bench see Brexit as an opportunity to rip up those vital protections.

In recent weeks, I have been speaking to businesses, industry organisations and trade unions. Last week, along with our shadow Brexit Secretary, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) and Baroness Chakrabarti, I travelled to Europe to meet EU officials and leaders to discuss the crisis and explain Labour's proposals. We left with no doubt whatsoever that our proposals are workable and could be negotiated, so tomorrow we will—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker

Order. I indicated to the House that the Prime Minister should be fairly and courteously heard, and the same goes for the Leader of the Opposition. If the usual suspects could just calm down, it would be in their interests and, more importantly, those of the House.

Jeremy Corbyn

Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Tomorrow, we will ask Parliament to vote on these proposals—they are workable and negotiable—which back the demands of working people all across this country and industry all across this country. I urge Members across this House to back that amendment to respect the result of the 2016 referendum and to safeguard jobs, investment and industry in this country. Labour accepts the result of the 2016 referendum, but we believe in getting the terms of our exit right, and that is why we believe in our alternative plan.

The Prime Minister's botched deal provides no certainty or guarantees for the future, and was comprehensively rejected by this House. We cannot risk our country's industry and people's livelihoods, so if it somehow passes in some form at a later stage, we believe there must be a confirmatory public vote to see if people feel that that is what they voted for. A no-deal outcome would be disastrous, and that is why we committed to backing the amendment, in the names of my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin), to rule out that reckless cliff-edge Brexit.

The Prime Minister appears to be belatedly listening to the House. Any extension is necessary only because of the Prime Minister's shambolic negotiations and her decision to run down the clock, but until the Prime Minister is clear about what alternative she would put forward in those circumstances, then she is simply continuing to run down the clock. She promises a short extension, but for what? If the Government want a genuine renegotiation, they should do so on the terms that can win a majority in this House and on the terms, backed by businesses and unions, that are contained within Labour's amendment, which I urge the whole House to back tomorrow.

The Prime Minister

I will first respond to a couple of the right hon. Gentleman's questions. He asked about the meaningful vote and whether new documents would be brought before the House. Of course, we are in discussions with the EU about changes—changes that this House said it wanted—to the Northern Ireland backstop. We are discussing those with the European Union. Any changes that are agreed with the European Union would be put before this House before the meaningful vote.

The right hon. Gentleman raised the issue of citizens' rights. As I covered in my statement, the EU does not have the legal authority to do a separate deal on citizens' rights without a new mandate. This is a matter, unless it is part of the withdrawal agreement—obviously, we have negotiated something within the withdrawal agreement; good rights for citizens within the withdrawal agreement—for individual member states. We have taken up the issue with individual member states. A number of them have already given good guarantees to UK citizens and we are encouraging those that have not to do so.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to workers' rights. I think it is important. [Interruption.] I am answering the points that he has made, but he does not seem to be too interested in listening to the answers that I am giving. He advocated dynamic alignment on workers' rights. I have to say that we on the Government side of the House think that those decisions should be taken in the UK, and in this House. One of the reasons for taking those decisions on workers' rights in this House, as I have said, is that Governments in this country, of different colours, have consistently given greater rights to workers than the European Union has negotiated.

The right hon. Gentleman referenced the Labour party's approach to a deal. Of course, its approach is that it wants a customs union, to be in the single market and to have a say on trade deals, in a way that says, "Well, please, if you're very nice to us, can we sit around the table and maybe some time we might be able to put an opinion on the trade deals?" If he wants the benefits of a customs union—no tariffs, no fees and no charges—they are there within the political declaration, in the deal

that has been negotiated by this Government. In that political declaration, we also have the right for us, as an independent country, to strike our own trade deals again, and not to have to rely on those struck in Brussels.

The right hon. Gentleman then spoke about the time running down to 29 March. My sole focus throughout all of this has been on getting a deal that enables us to leave the European Union on 29 March with a deal. It is the right hon. Gentleman who has kept no deal on the table, by refusing to agree to a deal. He talks about uncertainty on jobs, but he could have voted to end uncertainty on jobs by backing the deal the Government brought back from the European Union.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman says that he and the Labour party accept the result of the referendum, yet we also know that they back a second referendum. By backing a second referendum, he is breaking his promise to respect the result of the 2016 referendum. He will be ignoring the biggest vote in our history and betraying the trust of the British people.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con)

May I congratulate the Prime Minister on accepting that we are not remotely ready for the chaos of a no-deal departure on 29 March? I agree with her that no deal at any time would bring very damaging medium and long-term prospects for the British economy and our wellbeing. I will continue to vote for any withdrawal agreement that she manages to get with the other EU countries, but I doubt that she will command a majority for any such agreement in the near future.

Can I turn to the real issue now? How long is the delay that we are contemplating? The Prime Minister seems to be giving us a date for a new cliff edge at the end of June, but is not the danger that we will merely continue the present pantomime performance through the next three months, and that the public will be dismayed as we approach that date and find that there is similar chaos about where we are going?

May I suggest that we contemplate a much calmer delay, that we have indicative votes following debates in this House, to see where a consensus or majority lies, and then that we prepare our position for the much more important long-term negotiations that have to take place on the eventual settlement? We cannot have several more years of what we have had for the past two years. We have to start proper negotiations with the EU on what exactly we contemplate as our long-term relationships with the Union.

The Prime Minister

Of course, we have the framework for that long-term relationship with the European Union set out in the political declaration—that is the set of instructions to the negotiators for the next stage—but my right hon. and learned Friend is right that we still have to go through that second stage of negotiations. He asked about any extension to article 50, should that be necessary. I am very clear that I do not want to see an extension to article 50. Should we be in the position that such a proposal was put before this House, I would want it to be as short as possible.

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

I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of her statement. I have to say that I find myself once again agreeing with the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). There is the possibility that we will extend article 50 beyond the end of June. In the light of that, may I give a helpful suggestion to the Prime Minister? The Scottish National party is already putting in place candidates for the European elections. May I suggest that the Conservatives consider doing the same?

There are only 19 parliamentary days until Brexit day, yet the Prime Minister wants to delay the meaningful vote until 12 March—why? From 12 March, there are only 10 parliamentary days before Brexit. We will have lost nine days in which this issue could have been resolved. The Dutch Prime Minister says:

“We are sleep walking into no deal scenario.”

There was no breakthrough in the 45-minute meeting with the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel. Council President Donald Tusk said that an extension of article 50 would be the “rational” decision. Although, that would suggest that this Government are capable of making rational decisions—there is little evidence of that.

Prime Minister, your strategy to run down the clock is disastrous. Is it not the case that you have continued to fail to reach an agreement on the backstop? Is it not the case that you cannot get the alternative arrangements on the backstop that you promised at the end of—

Mr Speaker

Order. I am not trying to get any alternatives to a backstop. Speak through the Chair, man.

Ian Blackford

Mr Speaker, is it not the case that the Government cannot get the alternative arrangements on the backstop that were promised at the end of January, because the EU will not renegotiate? The EU has repeatedly made it clear that the withdrawal agreement is non-negotiable. What does the Prime Minister not get about that?

Prime Minister, businesses and citizens are worried about no deal—worried about the supply of medicines and food. It is the height of irresponsibility for any Government to threaten their citizens with such consequences. The Prime Minister sits and laughs at what she is doing to the people of the United Kingdom—what a disgrace! This Prime Minister indicates that she is simply not fit for office. Prime Minister, will you accept the overwhelming advice of business, MPs and your Cabinet? Rule out no deal and extend article 50, but do it today. This should not be left until the middle of March.

Mr Speaker, we cannot trust this Prime Minister. Parliament should take the opportunity to impose the timeline that she has set out today, so that she cannot dodge this.

The Prime Minister

The right hon. Gentleman made various references to the discussions with the European Union. He asked why the meaningful vote was not being brought back this week, or before the latest date of 12 March. The answer is that we are taking this time to negotiate the changes required by this House to the deal that we negotiated with the European Union. That includes the work that has been done on alternative arrangements. As I indicated in my statement, further work on those alternative arrangements has already been agreed with the European Union. There were all those questions about there not being an opportunity to renegotiate or get any changes, but that is not the case; we are in talks with the European Union and we are talking about the issues that this House required.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman talked about uncertainty: the uncertainty of not having the arrangements in place. If he wants to end uncertainty and if he wants to deal with the issues he raised in his response to my statement, then he should vote for a deal—simples.

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

I welcome my right hon. Friend's—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker

Order. I appeal to the House to give the right hon. Gentleman the respectful attention that he probably wants and I think he should have.

Mr Duncan Smith

Very kind of you, Mr Speaker. I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. Clearly, she is right that we would prefer to have a deal. In the statement, she talked about alternative arrangements, which are based, it appears, on the Malthouse compromise details. May I remind my right hon. Friend that it is clear, behind closed doors, that UK Government officials and the EU recognise that what is currently in the backstop is unworkable and that they will therefore have to implement alternative arrangements? When she sits down with them to ask for that, could she now say that those alternative arrangements must reach a point of a deadline date and be bound legally, so that they cannot renege from that after we leave?

The Prime Minister

In fact, there has not been the suggestion that the arrangements in the backstop are unworkable. What there has been in the discussions with the European Union is an acceptance of the desire to discuss those alternative arrangements, work on them, and have them in place such that, were it the case that we ended the implementation period without the future relationship in place and that insurance policy for no hard border in Northern Ireland was necessary, we would have the alternative arrangements to put in place, rather than the backstop as it is currently within the withdrawal agreement. One of the key issues raised by the European Union around the alternative arrangements actually relates to the significant number of derogations from European Union law that will be necessary to put the alternative arrangements in place.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab)

While I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister has, at long last and with the greatest reluctance, been persuaded by a group of her own Ministers to accept that there is no majority in this House for leaving the European Union on 29 March with no deal, does she not understand that in all likelihood there will continue to be no majority in the House for leaving with no deal, whether it is March, June or October? Therefore, the question I want to put to her is this: if we are going to have an extension to article 50, what does she intend to use that time for?

The Prime Minister

I have been very clear that I want the work we are currently doing to ensure that we get a deal that can command the support of this House. What I said in my statement is that if we lose another meaningful vote, we will then put a vote to the House on its view on leaving the European Union on 29 March with no deal. Were it the case that the House rejected the meaningful vote and voted for not leaving without a deal, then a motion would come before the House in relation to a short, limited extension of article 50. The right hon. Gentleman talks again—he has raised this previously in the House—about there being no majority for leaving with no deal. As I say, the House has to face up to the fact that if it does not want to leave with no deal then either it wants to stay in the European Union, which would betray the trust and the vote of the British people, or it has to accept and vote for a deal.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con)

Today's statement cannot have been easy for the Prime Minister to make, because she is rightly determined that we should honour the result of the referendum. I say that as somebody who campaigned very strongly for us to remain in the EU. But it probably has not been greeted with

great alacrity in the country, because the uncertainty out there, affecting businesses and individuals, is now crushing. Can she please make it clear that a deal which can command a majority of this House is eminently possible if there can be agreement on changes to the backstop and putting in place alternative arrangements? Can she also confirm that it is then incumbent on MPs on all sides of the House to vote for this deal, which will be in the national interests of this country?

The Prime Minister

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. First, in the talks with the European Union we are discussing delivering the changes required by this House regarding its concern about the potential indefinite nature of the backstop. There is the prospect—I believe we have it within our grasp—to get an agreement such that we can leave the European Union on 29 March with a deal. When those changes are brought back I hope, as my right hon. Friend says, that every Member of this House will recognise their responsibility to deliver on the vote of the referendum in 2016 to deliver Brexit, and to do it in the best way possible, which is with a deal.

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

The Prime Minister has said, for the first time, that she is willing to put a motion extending article 50. I hope that reflects the strong arguments that have been made from all parts of the House about the damage no deal would do to this country. But she will also know that promised votes have been pulled before, that Commons motions have been ignored before, and that when the Commons previously voted against no deal the Brexit Secretary told the House that Government policy was still to leave on 29 March with no deal if the deal had not been passed. He said:

“Frankly, the legislation takes precedence over the motion”.—[Official Report, 14 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 1070.]

If there is no legislation in place, what assurances do we have that: votes will definitely be put; the Government will abide by any motions; and the entire Cabinet will abide by any votes? What will the Government’s policy be in those circumstances? Will it be to argue for no deal or will it be to argue for an extension?

The Prime Minister

First, the right hon. Lady references the Cabinet. This has been discussed by Cabinet, so this is a position that the Government have taken. I would not have brought it before the House today if it were not a position that the Government had taken on this issue.

I have set those dates. If she would care to look at what I have been doing over recent weeks, she will see the points where I have said I would come back today. On the previous time I came back to the House there was a guarantee that I would come back to the House. I said I would bring a motion, and we brought a motion. We will bring a motion tomorrow. So there is a clear and firm commitment from this Government to ensure that we bring those votes to this House. The House then has that opportunity.

I recognise the concern of right hon. and hon. Members to ensure that the voice of the House is heard. That is why I said that those votes will be brought before the House should we lose the meaningful vote. I continue to want to see this House supporting a meaningful vote, so that we can leave with a deal. As she will have heard in my statement, in the case that a vote for no deal and then a vote for an extension had been put forward, we would take that to the European Union. The decision would not be entirely ours. There has to be a unanimous decision of the 27 member states of the European Union to agree that extension, but were that agreed, we would bring forward the necessary legislation.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con)

Will my right hon. Friend accept that the Bill to delay article 50, to which the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) has just referred, would incur many billions of pounds of taxpayers' money that would otherwise be available for public services and would otherwise not be handed over to the EU if we left on 29 March? Will she also accept that the Bill is effectively aimed at overturning the democratic will of the British people, which Parliament itself expressly entrusted to the British people and must be honoured?

The Prime Minister

My hon. Friend raises a number of points about the Bill proposed by the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford. Given the commitments the Government have made in relation to these issues, I hope Members would consider that the mechanisms in the Bill have constitutional implications beyond simply the Brexit issue, in terms of the relationship between Government and Parliament, and our democratic institutions going forward. I have been clear today. I want to see a deal that this House can support and which enables us to leave on 29 March with a deal. That is what the Government are working on and that is what the Government continue to work on.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD)

The Prime Minister is right that simply postponing a cliff edge for three months is pointless or worse, but now that the Leader of the Opposition has listened to advice from his colleagues, Liberal Democrat Members and others and accepted the principle of a people's vote with the option to remain, will she not listen to the advice of her own Ministers, who are saying that a no-deal Brexit—whether at the end of March or the end of June—would be so damaging that it must now be firmly ruled out?

The Prime Minister

I say to the right hon. Gentleman yet again that he talks about firmly ruling out a no-deal option and there are only two alternatives to no deal: one is to revoke article 50 and stay in the European Union, which we will not do, and the other is to agree a deal. If he wants to take no deal off the table, I hope that when the deal is back, he will vote for that deal.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con)

It is abundantly clear just from listening to the questions today that there is not a consensus in this House and that we do face gridlock. We have now run down the clock, and rather than wasting more time repeating votes that we have already had and that this House has already expressed its will on—for example, on no deal and on the Government's deal and the withdrawal agreement—is it not now time that we all put our effort into recognising the gridlock and taking responsibility for deciding how we get out of it? I do not believe that it is going to change and we can keep on going round in circles, with all the damage that that does to businesses and jobs, or we can confront it, decision it and find a route forward for Britain.

The Prime Minister

Obviously, I recognise that my right hon. Friend feels very strongly about these issues. I want to see us able to deliver on the result of the referendum and to do that in what I believe is the best way for this country, which is to leave with a deal. That is what we will be working on. She talks about decision points. There will be a decision point for this House in a meaningful vote, looking at the changes that have been agreed with the European Union, and at that stage, I hope that every Member of this House will recognise the need to respect the result of the referendum in 2016 and to leave the European Union with a deal.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab)

Is not the crucial difference between what the Prime Minister is proposing and the proposal of the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), who chairs the Home Affairs Committee, that theirs is watertight and legally binding and that the Prime Minister's is not. Given the number of times that she has gone back on her word and caved in to the European Research Group, why should we trust anything she is saying?

The Prime Minister

There is a difference between the proposal that the right hon. Gentleman refers to and the commitments that I have given today—that is, the proposal that has been put forward goes much wider than the issue of Brexit. I have a concern about the future relationship between the Government and Parliament—about ensuring that we can continue to maintain what has been a balanced relationship between the Government and Parliament that has stood this country well over many years and about retaining that into the future.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con)

I congratulate the Prime Minister and the Brexit Secretary on persuading the European Union to accept a taskforce to work up the alternative arrangements group's proposals into a practical proposition, because what has emerged from our discussions is that the customs arrangements have been cut and pasted from the old Turkish agreement. They are archaic and would require 255 million pieces of paper to be stamped with a wet chop, as in Ming dynasty China. If the Prime Minister could make these proposals legally binding with a definitive implementation date, she would remove the toxic backstop and get many Government Members to vote for the agreement. Will she get a legally binding change in the text to deliver that?

The Prime Minister

I say to my right hon. Friend that the commitment is that we will ensure, as I said to our right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), that were we to get to the point of it being necessary to exercise what is known as the backstop, or the insurance policy for no hard border in Northern Ireland, at the end of the implementation period where it is necessary, we want to have the alternative arrangements ready to go at that point such that the backstop, as currently drafted, never needs to be used. That is the aim and the intent. We want to work on this quickly so that we have those clearly ready and understood before that date, but the commitment is to ensure that those alternative arrangements can indeed replace the backstop and ensure that it does not need to be used.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP)

The Prime Minister's withdrawal deal agreement as proposed in draft was defeated in this House by 230 votes—she hardly needs reminding of that—and the reason primarily for the loss of the majority was the backstop. She has committed to binding legal changes in terms of the backstop, effectively reopening the withdrawal agreement, and she must know that without a legally watertight way out of the backstop, we certainly could not support any future withdrawal agreement brought to this House. Does she think that the machinations of some of her Ministers and the proposals that she has announced today will have the effect in Brussels and on European leaders of making them more likely to concede what is necessary or that perhaps they will just sit back and wait?

The Prime Minister

The discussions I have had in the European Union with EU leaders and, indeed, with the European Commission are very clear: they are entering into those talks with us with the intention of finding a resolution to the issue that this House has raised and that the right hon. Gentleman has just referenced again—that is, to ensure we have that legally binding change that ensures that people can have the confidence that the issue that the House raised about the potential indefinite nature of the backstop has been addressed and resolved. That is what we are working on. I recognise that the right hon. Gentleman has always been consistent in his references to the need for the right legal status for that change, and that is what we are working for.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con)

I am pleased to hear from my right hon. Friend a willingness to consider the possibility of an extension of article 50 to prevent a catastrophic no-deal Brexit. She also said, rightly, that across this House there are widely divergent views on why the deal that she has negotiated in good faith has been rejected. My concern is simply this: I see no reason to think that that situation will change, because despite what she has done in good faith, it is a second-rate outcome for our country. If this is to continue, how are we indeed to break the logjam? And here I have to say to her that her browbeating of the House, which she did today—indicating that unless we simply go along with a deal that is considered to be inadequate, there is no solution but a no-deal Brexit or a unilateral revocation—is simply inaccurate, because surely it is perfectly possible and utterly democratic for us to go back and ask the public whether the deal she has negotiated is acceptable or not.

The Prime Minister

My right hon. and learned Friend says that there are diverse views around this House and that there has been no indication, therefore, why the withdrawal agreement was rejected. Indeed, the House did indicate why the withdrawal agreement was rejected. It did so in a majority vote on 29 January that indicated that it was an issue around the backstop, that changes to the backstop were required and that the House would support the withdrawal agreement with the necessary changes to the backstop. It is not right to say that this House has not indicated the result that it wishes to see. He also aims slightly to chastise me on the options that I have put before the House today, but I say to him that a second referendum does not change the fact that ultimately, the three options open to us are to leave the European Union with a deal, to leave it with no deal, or to have no Brexit. Those will remain the options.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Ind)

This is a shameful moment. Nothing has changed—apart from the fact that some of us who used to sit on the Government side are now sitting on the Opposition side. One of the reasons for that is that yet again we see from the Prime Minister can kicking at the same time as fudge is being created and a failure to put the country and the nation's interests first. Instead, the future of the Conservative party is put first and foremost. Right hon. and hon. Members who sit on the Government side made it clear that they would vote in accordance with their consciences and the national interest—
[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker

Order. Mr Blunt—be quiet. Be quiet. You are not the arbiter of what the right hon. Lady says. I will be the judge of that. Do not try to shout her down. It is beneath you—and more importantly, it will fail.

Anna Soubry

Actually, I did not hear what the hon. Gentleman said; that is the benefit of being older and a bit deaf, Mr Speaker.

In any event, the important point is this. Right hon. and hon. Members on the Government side—those in government, and senior Back Benchers—made it very clear that they would vote to take no deal off the table, break a three-line Whip and, if necessary, either resign or be sacked from the Government. Will the Prime Minister confirm that indeed nothing has changed and that no deal remains firmly on the table?

The Prime Minister

The right hon. Lady talks about acting in the national interest. At every stage of this, the national interest has been the focus of the work that I have been doing. That is why I negotiated what I believe to be a good deal with the European Union. That deal was indeed, as others have referenced, rejected by this House. It is why I have then listened to the views of this House on what the House wanted to see changed in the withdrawal agreement and in the package negotiated, to ensure that the House could support that package. That is why we are in talks with the European Union on that. That is why I intend to work to bring back to this House changes that this House can support and changes that ensure that we will be able to leave the European Union, and do so with a deal.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con)

Most of my constituents are in awe of the stoic way in which the Prime Minister has acted over these past two years, dealing with a subject that no other Prime Minister has ever had to deal with. There is no book to go and check what happened before: she is breaking new ground. Can the Prime Minister tell me, though, what she thinks is the maximum extension she would seek to our withdrawal?

The Prime Minister

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. My view on this is very simple. First, I do not want to see an extension—[Interruption.] Yes, it is very simple. Secondly, were there to be an extension, I believe that it should be as short as possible. It is already the case that we are nearly three years on from the referendum in 2016. People who voted for us to leave the European Union are rightly questioning that timetable and want to see us actually leaving the European Union. Should the House vote for a short limited extension, I would want to see that being as short as possible.

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

The Prime Minister was worrying that the Bill of the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) would set a precedent. But there is a very easy solution to this: the Prime Minister could bring forward that Bill in Government time, as a Government Bill, and whip for it. My suspicion is that the Prime Minister is yet again leaving herself wriggle room on the issue of no deal. We have already voted against no deal in this House. She says she is going to allow us a vote on no deal, but then she says that no deal will still be on the table even if we do that. Will she confirm, yet again, that there will be no legal impediment to no deal at the end of this process? So what is this extension for?

The Prime Minister

What we have seen, of course, is that, yes, the House voted in the way the hon. Gentleman indicated, but we are now working with the European Union. We will bring changes agreed with the European Union back to this House for a further meaningful vote. Members of this House will then have the opportunity to determine whether they want to leave the European Union with a deal or not. Should they reject no deal, the further votes that I have given a commitment to will take place.

Mr Speaker

Mr Blunt, having heard you—it was rather unwelcome—from your seat, perhaps we can now hear you on your feet.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con)

I rather suspect that given all the enthusiasm that Brenda of Bristol had for the last general election, the prospect of an extension of this debate for several months will be received with dismay by the country. However, underneath that dismay is massive uncertainty. There is a real price for extending this debate, and I urge my right hon. Friend to stick to her guns and make sure that there is a choice between her deal and leaving to World Trade Organisation terms. That is the choice that the European Union faces, which hopefully will bring it to end the backstop, and that is the choice that the Labour party should face as well.

The Prime Minister

My hon. Friend is right that we can indeed bring an end to the uncertainty. We can do that. I believe that the best way to do that is through a meaningful vote in this House to support the deal that the Government will bring back from the European Union.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP)

We all know that no deal would be an absolute catastrophe on so many different levels. Does the Prime Minister acknowledge that her own deal will have a huge impact on the economy as well? Cutting immigration of EU nationals by 80% will be the ruination of many cities and towns across our country.

The Prime Minister

I say to the hon. Lady that we now have the opportunity, as a result of leaving the European Union, to put a new immigration system into place—yes, to bring an end to free movement once and for all; that was an important element of the referendum debate and the reason why, I think, quite a number of people voted to leave the European Union. We can now put in place an immigration system based not on where somebody comes from, but on the skills they have and the contribution they will make to this country.

Mr Speaker

The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) has perambulated from one part of the Chamber to another, but fortunately I can still see him. He is now next to the Father of the House—a very important position.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con)

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for that warm-hearted introduction.

There may be a special place in hell for those of us who want a clean break with the European Union, but does my right hon. Friend agree that there will be the devil to pay for any party that tries to hold a second referendum to reverse the result of the first one?

The Prime Minister

I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. Our party campaigned to respect the result of the referendum and the Labour party campaigned saying that it would respect the result of the referendum. It is important that we do just that.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab)

As we speak, the Prime Minister's Government are preparing to apply tariffs to basic food items such as cheese and meat, the price of which will be paid by families in this country who have

suffered enough. Is this really the Tory party that the Prime Minister thought she would lead—banging on about Europe, all the while creating new burning injustices every day it is in office?

The Prime Minister

We have negotiated a deal with the European Union that is very clear on the issue of no tariffs. It is open to Members of this House, with the changes that will be brought back following our discussions with the European Union, to support that deal.

I also say to the hon. Lady that this Government have been dealing with a number of burning injustices in this country, which were not dealt with by a previous Labour Government. I cite things like the action we have taken on stop and search, in relation to mental health and on the race disparity audit.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con)

Clearly, having no deal with our largest trading partner is deeply unattractive, which is why I have supported the deal. The Government position has been to leave with a deal, and the Conservative party manifesto was very clear that we wanted both a trade deal and a customs arrangement. If we do get to 12 March and, unfortunately, the deal is not accepted, will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Government's position will remain that we want to secure a deal and that, if our negotiators need that little bit more time, the Government will not be whipping their Ministers to block the extension?

The Prime Minister

My hon. Friend is absolutely right in saying that the Government have been very clear throughout all this that we believe that the best route for the United Kingdom is to leave the European Union with a deal. That will continue to be this Government's position. I want to work to ensure that the situation she refers to does not arise because we are able to get that agreement in the meaningful vote and get a deal agreed.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab)

Can the Prime Minister explain how she intends to obviate the need for checks on rules of origin without accepting common external tariffs? Is it not the case that the only realistic way of meeting that commitment in the political declaration is to negotiate a new customs union with the EU?

The Prime Minister

We put forward proposals on how we could achieve that some months ago, and there will of course be a debate on the balance between alignment and checks when we come to the next stage of the negotiations.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con)

The withdrawal negotiations are nearing their final, most crucial and most delicate stages. Against that background, does my right hon. Friend not agree that talk from certain quarters of her Government of immediately extending the article 50 process and taking no deal off the table is simply giving succour to our interlocutors in Brussels, and, if anything, undermining the position of the British negotiators?

The Prime Minister

As I have said on a number of occasions, simply extending article 50 does not resolve the issue of the decision that the House will have to make. When the time comes, it will be for every Member of the House to decide whether we should respect the result of the referendum and whether we should do that by leaving with a deal, with the changes that will be achieved through the negotiations that

are currently being undertaken with the European Union. However, that choice—no deal, a deal, or no Brexit—will be before every Member when the time comes.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab)

I always admire a good U-turn on either side of the House, and I am delighted to welcome the Prime Minister's screeching U-turn today and her acceptance that the House must have a chance to vote against no deal; but can she be clear, because she has not been thus far? If we have that vote on 12 or 13 March, will her Government be voting in favour of no deal or against it?

The Prime Minister

I am hearing conflicting views from across the Chamber. On one hand I am told that nothing has changed, and on the other hand I am told that we have done a U-turn.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con)

The Prime Minister was told a long time ago that this would be the easiest deal in history, and that we would be in an implementation period and not a transition period. Given the importance of the future trade arrangements to this country, will she commit herself to ensuring that red lines are put before Parliament for Parliament's democratically elected representatives to vote on, in relation to the future trade agreement? That is the way to ensure that the credibility of our democracy is not undermined.

The Prime Minister

Let me give my hon. Friend some reassurance. I have indicated on a number of occasions in the House that as we look to that next stage of the negotiations—which will indeed cover the trade relationship that we will have with the EU in the long term, but also other issues such as our security arrangements, and some underpinning issues such as the exchange of data—we will be seeking more involvement from Parliament, and my right hon. Friends the Brexit Secretary and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster are considering what form that interaction with Parliament should take in the future.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green)

European leaders have made it pretty clear that they would only agree to an extension of article 50 for a good reason, not just to enable the Prime Minister to faff and dither and delay and do some more can-kicking down the road. That extension must be for a purpose. Will the Prime Minister therefore make another U-turn and support the proposal for a confirmatory public vote, which is now gaining support on both sides of the House?

The Prime Minister

I have made my views on this issue clear on a number of occasions in this Chamber. There are those who are talking about a confirmatory vote on the deal, and including on that ballot paper the option of remaining in the European Union.

Caroline Lucas

Yes.

The Prime Minister

The hon. Lady says yes to that. I have to say to her that it would not be respecting the result of the referendum, and that 80% of the votes cast in the last general election were for parties that said they would respect it.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con)

Does my right hon. Friend agree that the whole history of the European Union has shown that time and again, when there are intractable disputes, agreement is obtained, often late at night, with about an hour to go before the clock runs out? Will she therefore stick to her deadline, and will she impress on the European Union that there is a majority in the House for her agreement if the necessary changes to the backstop can be made?

The Prime Minister

I thank my right hon. Friend for drawing attention to that issue in relation to the European Union. We are indeed in the process of those talks with the European Union, and have made clear to it that—as the vote in the House showed—there is support for a withdrawal agreement provided that we can see those necessary changes in relation to the backstop.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab)

I feel so enraged this week by the complete and utter lack of bravery to do the right thing for our country. Perhaps it is because I have spent my week in my constituency trying to put out the burning injustices that the Prime Minister's Government have started where I live. I will not sit one more day and listen to the Prime Minister crow about employment going up, while where I live employment is falling and hunger is rising. I currently have one midwife—one!—for the entirety of my constituency. There are people in my constituency who are living in hotels, and who have to move out because Crufts is coming to Birmingham.

Will the Prime Minister do a brave thing and do, once, what is best for the country, not what is best for any of us? Will she be brave, and will she at least answer the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith)? Will she at least vote against no deal herself?

The Prime Minister

I recognise the passion with which the hon. Lady has made the point about her constituency, but time and again I am asked questions in the Chamber the implication of which is to try to deny the facts of the situation that are before us. The facts of the situation are very simple. The House will have a decision to make, but only three options will be before it: to leave the European Union with a deal, to leave without a deal, or to revoke article 50 and have no Brexit. I have made clear that the last of those options is one that I will not support, and I believe that the House should not support it, because it would be going back on the result of the referendum.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con)

I do believe that the Prime Minister has shown some courage today, because there is some welcome pragmatism in what she has announced. She has acknowledged the fear that people have of time running out, and, like the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), the desperate need of the businesses in our constituencies to have certainty. Without a doubt that certainty can be provided by Parliament's voting for her deal when she puts it forward, but given that it may not be carried, will she confirm that the UK will now only leave the EU without a deal if Parliament explicitly provides consent?

The Prime Minister

As I said in my statement, if when we bring the meaningful vote back Parliament rejects that meaningful vote, we will table a motion to ask Parliament its view on whether or not we should be leaving without a withdrawal agreement and a future framework. On that basis, we would only leave without a deal with the consent of Parliament. But I echo the point that my right hon. Friend made at the beginning of her question: the best thing for Parliament to do is to vote for a deal, such that we can leave with a deal.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab)

The first thing that South Wales Police raised with me when I was elected in 2001 was the problem they were experiencing with obtaining up-to-date information from other police forces in Europe so that they could tackle paedophilia in the south Wales valleys. We have managed to achieve obtaining that over recent years, as I am sure the Prime Minister knows from her time as Home Secretary, but if we leave without a deal—as she rightly said in her first letter to the European Union triggering article 50—we will not have a deal on security, and that means that the police, from the day afterwards, will not have access to that information. How are we going to make sure that we are safe if we proceed down the no-deal path?

The Prime Minister

Let me say first to the hon. Gentleman that I do indeed recognise the issue that he has raised. One of the early things that I did when I became Home Secretary was agree that the United Kingdom should be part of the European Investigation Order. I stood at this Dispatch Box while the hon. Gentleman's right hon. and hon. Friends tried to prevent me from ensuring that we could keep measures such as the European arrest warrant.

Let me also say to the hon. Gentleman, however, that I believe that leaving with a deal is the right thing to be done for this country, for a variety of reasons. Most people focus on the trade and customs issues, but the security issues are just as important. That is why obviously in no-deal preparations we work with others across the European Union to see what arrangements can be in place in a no-deal, but it is also why the deal we have negotiated is the best thing to happen, because it allows us access to key areas such as the passenger name records and Prüm.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con)

Will my right hon. Friend please confirm whether over the last fortnight in conversations with EU members she has heard anything to suggest that any EU country would fail to give us an extension to article 50, and if that is the case what those reasons might be?

The Prime Minister

I have not been discussing with individual member states an extension to article 50; what I have been discussing with them is what the UK Parliament requires—what this House requires—in order to get the change that would secure a majority in this House for the withdrawal agreement. However, the point is very simple: were it to be the case that an extension of article 50 were requested by the UK, that would require the unanimous consent of all 27 members of the European Union. I have not had that discussion with them.

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

The Prime Minister will remember that I started off feeling sympathetic to her, especially when she began saying that she wanted to talk to people, and then I felt rather sorry for her. But I have to tell her on behalf of my constituents and myself that I feel very frightened by what she has said today. I believe that the Prime Minister has lost her sense of direction and lost the real message that every Prime Minister should have in mind. Forget about referendums—I think of Mussolini when I think of referendums. The responsibility of the Prime Minister is the national interest and the health, welfare and prosperity of the people we all represent. Will she remind herself of that, face down the people on her Back Benches, and do something that delivers to this House? There is a two thirds majority for a sensible conclusion; let us bring those on all the Benches together and discuss this. Two thirds of the Members in this House want a sensible solution.

The Prime Minister

I am thinking precisely of the national interest when I sit down with the European Commission and other European Union leaders with a view to negotiating changes to the withdrawal agreement and the package we agreed, such that we can bring that back to this House and get agreement for a deal.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con)

So that I can prepare to realign myself to the metaphysical plane: what is my right hon. Friend's estimate of the possibility of our leaving on time?

The Prime Minister

It is my estimation that it is within our grasp to get changes such that we can bring a deal back to this House to enable this House to confirm in a meaningful vote its intention to leave the European Union with a deal on 29 March.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab)

For 22 years I have served the constituents of Don Valley, and I have dealt with many constituents and their plights. At no time in those 22 years have they looked to the EU to supply the answers to the injustices they have faced, whether in terms of poverty or housing or having a decent education or health service; a Labour Government supply the answers to those issues. That is why it is so important to recognise that in this House there are people on the remain and the leave side for whom no deal will ever be good enough. The time has come to recognise, as is said in the first line of the first leaflet of the 2017 election from Labour, that the decision to leave has been made by the British people. We said in the relevant chapter of our manifesto that we are here to negotiate Brexit, not stop it. Does the Prime Minister agree that she needs to show compromise, but so does everybody else in this House?

The Prime Minister

I absolutely agree. Compromise is necessary of course and we have seen compromise already in relation to the deal that has been negotiated, but the right hon. Lady is absolutely right to point out, as I referenced earlier, that 80% of the votes at the last general election were cast for parties that were clear in their manifestos that we would respect the result of the referendum, and we should be doing just that. I believe the best way to do that is to leave the European Union with a deal, and I intend to bring a deal back to this House of Commons that I would hope and expect the House can support.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con)

Is it not still the reality that the withdrawal agreement—warts and all, amended or not—remains the only serious show in town if we are to leave the EU, and does the Prime Minister think that if this deal keeps getting voted down by this House she will need to stand alongside the Leader of the Opposition, go on television and explain and level with the British public why this House is institutionally and politically incapable of delivering Brexit?

The Prime Minister

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that we are seeking changes to the withdrawal agreement, but the bulk of it remains the same. It is about intricate issues such as the legal aspects for those businesses that have contracts with the European Union after we leave the European Union, and citizens' rights and ensuring the guarantees and protections for citizens' rights. He says that in the event that this House did not vote for a deal I should stand by the Leader of the Opposition and explain why this House had not voted for a deal; that might be a little difficult because, given his new policy, the Leader of the Opposition does not seem to want to deliver Brexit.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab)

The Prime Minister's language, borrowed from the extremists, in describing the Bill from my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) as commandeering the House is totally irresponsible. Does the Prime Minister not understand that this is a parliamentary democracy, that we own the Standing Orders and that we can vote to change them either permanently or temporarily at any time?

The Prime Minister

Of course it is absolutely right that the Standing Orders of this House can be changed by this House; in recent times the Standing Orders of this House have often been interpreted in ways that were not expected.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con)

The vast majority of my constituents in Gloucester would echo every word the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) said; they voted and the country voted to leave and we in our manifestos chose to respect the result of that referendum. So there is no question about us leaving; the only issue at stake, and the only issue my constituents worry about, is the inability of this House to get behind the Prime Minister and resolve the withdrawal agreement Bill. Given that business, and particularly manufacturing, is hurting and will hurt with every day going forward, will my right hon. Friend confirm that if she can agree with the European Union the changes she is rightly looking for before 12 March, she will come back to this House earlier and put the question as soon as possible?

The Prime Minister

I thank my hon. Friend for the point he makes; he is absolutely right that the vast majority of members of the public want to see this House delivering leaving the European Union and doing so in the best way for this country, and we will be working to ensure we get those changes as soon as possible. When I said there will be a vote by 12 March, I meant that that is the last date for a vote, and if it is possible to bring it earlier I will do so.

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

Listening to this mess it is no wonder that in Scotland the EU is more popular than the UK. The only sovereign decision this Parliament can take is to revoke article 50, to prevent leaving without a deal. An extension to article 50 means the Prime Minister has to beg the EU27 and put the UK at the mercy of the kindness of the EU27. Does she not agree that revoking article 50 is better than leaving without a deal, which is the current trajectory for the UK given the letter she wrote on 29 March 2017?

The Prime Minister

I do not agree that revoking article 50 is a better route for this country. Members across this House gave people in the country the opportunity to decide whether to leave the European Union or not; they voted to leave the EU and I believe it is imperative that we respect that vote and deliver on that vote.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con)

When the Prime Minister brings her deal back to the House of Commons I will vote for it the second time; as the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) has said, it is time and we need to support the deal. If the deal, however, does not succeed in the House, will the Prime Minister then give the House the option of voting for Britain joining the European free trade area—Common Market 2.0, the Norway option—which commands support from across the House and from some Eurosceptics such as Daniel Hannan?

The Prime Minister

I thank my right hon. Friend for the commitment that he has given in relation to the meaningful vote. I think he is trying to step forward to a stage beyond, when we have taken those other votes through this House. As I say, the first aim of the Government, and my first aim, is to bring back a meaningful vote that can command support across the House, such that we are able to leave with a deal. I believe that the arrangements within the political declaration have significant benefits in relation to issues such as customs and also provide for us to have an independent trade policy and no free movement. Those are important elements of what people voted for in 2016.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab)

I am glad the Prime Minister has finally recognised that if she cannot get her agreement through, we will need to extend article 50 to avoid the risk and disruption of no deal on 29 March, but like many others, I fear that we will just end up here again at the end of any extension, however long it might be, because the Prime Minister will not change course. She keeps talking about the facts, but there are different facts out there, if only she would open her eyes. Is it not the truth that she could get her agreement through if she changed her red lines and worked across the House, or if she had the courage of her convictions and put her withdrawal agreement back to the public? That is the way to break the Brexit deadlock.

The Prime Minister

The hon. Lady knows my answer in relation to putting the deal back to the public. I believe it is our job to respect the result of the referendum and to deliver on that. There are those who wish to put that deal back to the public against a no deal, and those who wish to put it back to the public against remaining in the European Union. I think that remaining in the European Union is not the right course for us to take. We should be leaving the European Union, and the best way to do that is with a deal.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con)

Public trust in this institution is low and falling. I welcome the Prime Minister's statement that she, this Government and this party will honour the referendum result. She, like me, campaigned for remain, and we are equally committed to getting a deal. I beg colleagues who do not think that this deal is perfect to vote for it so that we can move on and deliver what the British people asked for. In the event that the House rejects the Prime Minister's deal again, which I hope it does not, and rejects no deal, can we use the extension period to reach across the House—in the spirit of what the right hon. Member for Don Valley has said—and look at EFTA instead of the backstop, and at other variations? We need to deliver a Brexit in the national interest, not party interest.

The Prime Minister

My hon. Friend is right to say that we are working to deliver a deal in the national interest. We have reached across the House, although we have so far had limited discussions with those on the official Opposition Front Bench. We are happy to continue those discussions with the Opposition Front Bench, but we have also been talking to Members from across the House. It is important that we get a deal that the House is able to support, and the stronger the support across the House, the better that will be.

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

The Prime Minister can surely not be unaware of the fear out there in the country about what no deal means. Surely her constituency surgeries, like mine, are full of people who cannot sleep at night for worrying about their businesses and their jobs and because of the fear of no deal. She has told us today that in the event of her deal being rejected again by this House, there will be a vote on

13 March to take no deal off the table. I will vote to take no deal off the table. She has been asked several times today about this, and she has lectured us all about personal responsibility, so how will the Prime Minister herself vote in those circumstances? If the House votes down her deal and she brings forward that motion, how will she vote? It is not just MPs who deserve an answer; it is the public.

The Prime Minister

The hon. Lady misses out a stage. There is a stage before we get to that point, which is the vote in this House on the meaningful vote and the deal, and I can assure her that I will be voting for a deal.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con)

May I gently remind the Prime Minister that we trade on World Trade Organisation terms with the rest of the world outside the EU and that we do so very profitably? She should not be deflected. Colleagues knew what they were voting for when triggering article 50. A concern must be that, at this crucial stage of the negotiations with the EU, the Prime Minister's next steps will now make a good deal less likely, because the EU will hope that Parliament will defeat no deal and extend article 50. When I voted against the Iraq war, I knew that I had to resign to do so. Has the time not come to face down those Ministers who have threatened to resign, in order to ensure that we achieve the best possible chance of a good deal?

The Prime Minister

I agree with my hon. Friend that we need to achieve the best possible chance of a good deal. Actually, we trade with other parts of the world on terms that are part of the EU's trade agreements with those other parts of the world, and we have been working to ensure that those would continue in the event of no deal, should there be no deal. I think that he and I are of one mind in that we want to leave according to the timetable that has been set and to leave with a good deal for the UK.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD)

The Prime Minister is now countenancing an extension to article 50. May I ask her to do the same in relation to a people's vote, and to acknowledge that a people's vote in a fair campaign, devoid of the extensive cheating of the campaign 900 days ago, is the best way of uniting the country around either her deal or staying in the European Union?

The Prime Minister

I refer the right hon. Gentleman to the answer that I have given to that question earlier this afternoon, and indeed to the answer that I have given to the same question that he has asked me in every statement I have made on this issue in recent months.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con)

I thank the Prime Minister for coming to the House yet again to update us on the European Union. She has been tireless in keeping the House informed, and her ability to keep going and trying to get a deal is welcomed across the House. I do hope that she will be able to come back with a deal that the whole House can vote for. However, if that is not the case, she has said 108 times that we will leave the European Union on 29 March, and if that is not possible, does she not think that the country will regard that as a betrayal?

The Prime Minister

What the country wants is to see us delivering on Brexit and delivering leaving the European Union. The timetable of 29 March was set and accepted by the House when it accepted the vote on article 50. As I have said, I want us to be able to do that and to leave on the basis of a deal, and we will be continuing to work to ensure that we can do that. The important issue that Members must

consider when they come to vote on the next meaningful vote is delivering on Brexit and giving the public the reassurance that we are actually going to do what they asked us to do.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab)

What would be the better democratic outcome for the country: accepting a second-rate deal resulting in a second-rate future, or holding a second public vote asking the public whether they support or reject a second-rate future for their children and grandchildren?

The Prime Minister

I think the best thing for the democratic health of this country is to deliver on the referendum result of 2016. As the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) has pointed out, people from across the House have campaigned on a manifesto to respect the referendum and deliver on Brexit. And the deal before the House is not a second-rate deal; it is a good deal for the UK.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con)

It is encouraging to hear from my right hon. Friend that, in her words, good progress has been made towards securing an alternative to the vexed issue of the backstop, but it is critical that hon. and right hon. Members have the opportunity to consider such new arrangements in advance of any vote. Is she confident that we will indeed have that opportunity in advance of the vote on 12 March?

The Prime Minister

I recognise the concern that Members will have. Of course, the bulk of the proposals that will be put back would be the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration, which have already been considered by the House, but I am clear that Members will need to have an opportunity to look at any changes that have been made and to consider them before they vote in the House.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab)

The Prime Minister has been forced to admit today for the first time that we do not have to leave without a deal on 29 March unless Parliament explicitly approves it. However, there is little point in applying for a two-month or three-month extension simply to carry on the same circular discussions with the same parliamentary gridlock. If we are to apply for an extension of the article 50 period, would it not be better, rather than specifying a time, to secure an extension for a purpose, which should be clarity on our future relationship with the EU? The lack of clarity is not down to the national interest, but because it is in the Conservative party's interest not to have to face up to the fundamental choices posed by Brexit.

The Prime Minister

No. We have considerable detail in the political declaration—more than many people thought it would be possible to achieve at this stage. It is not possible to have a legal text, but the EU cannot agree legal texts with us until we are outside the EU. People are focusing on an issue at the heart of the future negotiations, which is the question of the balance between alignment with rules on goods and agricultural products and checks at the border. The spectrum is identified in the political declaration, because the UK Government's clear position is that we are aiming for and want to work towards frictionless trade, and the EU is concerned about the impact of that on the single market. It is that discussion between the UK and the EU that is at the heart of the political declaration.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con)

In seeking to limit us either to an agreement that ties us to the EU without a clear end, an extension of this corrosive period of limbo, or a second public vote, does the Prime Minister share my profound democratic concern that Members of this House are contriving to deny those whom we serve any option that honours the referendum result?

The Prime Minister

As I have said on many occasions, I am clear that we should honour the result of the referendum. I believe that the deal we put before the House, which was rejected by the House, did that. The deal that we will bring back will reflect the work that we have done with the European Union in response to concerns that have been raised by this House. I expect and hope that I will be able to bring back a deal that Members across this House will see is the best way for us to leave the European Union.

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

From what the Prime Minister says, I understand that from her point of view the backstop is the crux of the matter. She stated:

“We discussed the legal changes that are required to guarantee that the Northern Ireland backstop cannot endure indefinitely”

but then she stopped, so what progress has been made to date in relation to those legal changes?

The Prime Minister

As I have said, we are in discussions about the legal changes. The hon. Lady says that it appears from listening to me that the issue is the backstop. Actually, this House made it clear that the issue was the backstop, because that is how this House voted on the 29 January.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con)

First it was a people’s vote, and now it is a confirmatory vote. Are not hon. Members using these euphemisms because, in reality, their proposal is for a second referendum and that, by definition, they are dishonouring the result of the first? Will the Prime Minister accept that many of us who fought hard for remain nevertheless accepted the result that the British people had given us and wished to implement that result? We have no admiration whatsoever for hon. Members who campaigned for the referendum, who stood on a manifesto to implement the result, who supported the referendum decision in a vote, who voted to trigger article 50 less than two years ago, and who now are in plain sight reneging on those promises.

The Prime Minister

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Whether it is called a people’s vote or a confirmatory vote, it is a second referendum. It is putting the decision back to the British people. We said that we would honour the decision, the Labour party stood on a manifesto of respecting that decision, and we should both do just that.

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

The Prime Minister says that she wants to unite the nation and this House, and she has again presented us today with her deal, no deal or no Brexit. Her deal faced the biggest ever defeat in this place, and no amount of backstop tinkering is going to change things for us on the Opposition Benches. Given that no deal has already been rejected twice by this House, what contingency planning she has done for no Brexit in the same way as for no deal, the assessment of which she is publishing today? If she will not rescind article 50, will she not accept that, ostensibly, the only sensible thing to do with 800 hours to go is to put her negotiated settlement back to the people, so that we can get a fresh assessment of the will of the people—the most accurate one—and then that can prevail?

The Prime Minister

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

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con)

I encourage the Prime Minister to continue her discussions with our European friends. May I gently warn the House against prejudging the outcome of those discussions, which I have heard decried across this place during these exchanges? Whatever happens over the next few days, weeks and hopefully not months, I know she will agree that holding a second referendum would be an affront to the people of Basildon and Thurrock, who knew full well what they were doing, and 73% of whom voted to leave.

The Prime Minister

Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right that we should honour the referendum result. We stood on a manifesto to do that, and other Members of this House stood on a manifesto to respect the referendum, and we should deliver Brexit.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab)

I hope the Prime Minister will forgive me when I say that every time she makes a promise from that Dispatch Box it is met with cynicism among the Opposition because of the number of promises she has broken and the number of votes in this House that she has decided not to take forward. That has been emphasised further today by her failure to answer a simple question: when the Division bell rings in this House to prevent no deal, will she vote for or against?

The Prime Minister

As I have said to other hon. Members and to others outside this House, one of the frustrations in this debate is the way in which people will not focus on the immediate issue before us. The immediate issue before us is negotiating changes to the deal such that we can take a meaningful vote in this House on a deal to leave the European Union.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con)

Yesterday, I was contacted by an engineer working for a laser manufacturer in Rugby involved in highly competitive export markets. As 29 March gets closer, he is very concerned about the viability of his company and the future of 100 jobs as a consequence of tariffs and delays that would be involved in no deal. How will the Prime Minister's statement today set my constituents' minds at rest?

The Prime Minister

I hope that my hon. Friend's constituents will take some reassurance from the fact that the Government are having constructive talks with the European Union and making progress in relation to the changes that this House has required to the withdrawal agreement and to the package that was agreed with the European Union in November, such that we can take a vote and leave the European Union on 29 March with a deal. I hope they will also take some reassurance from the fact that if this House again votes to reject that deal, I have set out the steps that would be taken in relation to further votes on no deal and on an extension to article 50

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab)

With every answer that the Prime Minister gives from the Dispatch Box, there is a collective sinking of hearts in the country, because she seems to engage in nothing but wishful thinking, and the country is fed up with watching its Prime Minister chase unicorns. Will she please confirm in what specific circumstances she believes, or has been told, that this one-off extension to article 50 will be granted by the EU? What specifically would she use that time to achieve?

The Prime Minister

As I said earlier, I have not discussed an extension of article 50 with other leaders around the European Union table. However, the European Union—in the form of the EU Council and the European Commission—has made it clear that it would expect any extension to be on the basis of a clear agreement that there was a plan for achieving the deal. I want to ensure that we can achieve the deal before we get to that point, and if the hon. Lady is worried about uncertainty in the House, it is very simple: vote for the deal.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con)

I voted remain in the referendum but, just like the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint), I completely accept the result and the fact that I stood on a manifesto committing me to implement it, but the Official Opposition have dishonoured their own manifesto with the U-turn that they announced yesterday. Despite its imperfections, I also accept that the currently proposed withdrawal agreement is the best way we have of implementing the referendum result, so the Prime Minister can expect my support in the Division on 12 March. However, if that is not successful, an extension strikes me as unlikely to lead to any change. Given that we have ruled out a referendum, the only remaining way of honouring the referendum result is to make a transition to WTO terms. Should the House not confront that choice now and be prepared to make that decision?

The Prime Minister

I thank my hon. Friend for the commitment he has given. I say to him, as I have said to others, that it is the case that, when we come to look at the changed withdrawal agreement, it will be necessary for every Member of this House to ask themselves whether they want to honour the result of the referendum and, in honouring the result of the referendum, whether they wish to do so by leaving with a deal. That will be the opportunity available to Members of this House when we bring back a meaningful vote and I hope that Members on both sides of the House will vote for a deal, to leave and to honour the referendum.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Ind)

The Prime Minister knows that the public are sick and tired of this impasse, born of politicians always putting their party political interests above the national interest. May I ask her not to belittle the genuine, heartfelt concern that many hon. Members have about the real lives, the real jobs and the real livelihoods that are at stake in a botched Brexit? That cannot just be swept under the carpet, and we should not just turn a blind eye. If we want to break through this gridlock, let us give the public a chance by having a people's vote now.

The Prime Minister

I recognise the uncertainty and the impact of that uncertainty on businesses and on people. The clear message I get when I speak to members of the public—I was out on the doorsteps again at the weekend—is that they want to see this resolved and that they want Parliament to get on with the job of voting for a deal and ensuring that we can leave the European Union. The hon. Gentleman knows my answer in relation to a people's vote, but were we to go for a people's vote, it would simply extend the uncertainty for a further period of time.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con)

I welcome the fact that, contrary to certain less than well informed opinions in this House, even among my right hon. Friend's Cabinet and junior Ministers, significant preparations have been undertaken by the EU, UK and Ireland for any eventuality. We now know, for instance, that aviation, financial derivatives, euro clearing, aerospace manufacturing, auto making, agriculture and other sectors of our economy will have access to the EU, that electricity interconnectors will be licensed, that UK insurance and extradition will be operative in Ireland and that simplified customs

procedures will eliminate, or greatly reduce, checks at our borders. Three further practical enhancements to border efficiency are suggested by my work with customs and freight operators that my right hon. Friend now has in her hands to implement in the national interest. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker

Be more lively, man.

Mr Fysh

Will my right hon. Friend, first, authorise intermediaries to have access to transitional simplified procedures? Secondly, will she allow them to be authorised consignees for the purpose of the transit system? Thirdly, will she instruct the Treasury to help underwrite a scheme that allows responsible intermediaries to guarantee liabilities to customs authorities within the transit system? [Interruption.] This way they can shoulder much of the responsibility for customs away from the border—

Mr Speaker

Order. Resume your seat, Mr Fysh. [Interruption.] Order. I indulged the hon. Gentleman, whose sincerity I greatly admire, but may I very politely suggest that he needs to develop some feel, some antennae, for the House? The House's fascination with his points is not as great as his own.

The Prime Minister

First, the issues to which my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr Fysh) refers—the measures indicated by the European Union—would only be there for a temporary and limited period. Secondly, he gives a long list of various issues in relation to the alternative arrangements at the border, some of which are precisely the issues that the European Union has raised a question over in relation to the derogations from EU law that would be required.

Mr Speaker

The consequence of that question is that people are now gesticulating at me to indicate that they are going to ask very short questions. A bit of sign language is being deployed.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab)

Brexit costs a lot, both in political energy and in diversion away from the issues that constituents raise about the NHS, schools and so on, but what has been the cost of Brexit, in pounds and pence, from when Mr Cameron announced the referendum to today?

The Prime Minister

The amount of money that the Government have set aside in relation to the work we are doing on preparedness for Brexit, for a deal and for no deal, has been clear and has been published. The Treasury has published the allocation of money to individual Departments.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con)

Mr Speaker, you will be delighted to know that I do not have a list. As my right hon. Friend is probably aware, more than 70% of the residents of Clacton voted to leave the EU. I, too, have been on the doorsteps, and I, too, have been getting a lot of mail. My residents do not want an extension to article 50, and they do not want a second divisive, and possibly destructive, referendum. Does she agree with President Juncker that it takes two to tango and that it is time the EU learned to dance?

The Prime Minister

My hon. Friend is absolutely right that a second referendum would be divisive and that we must honour the result of the first referendum. I think what President Juncker said is that it takes two to tango and that he is rather good at dancing.

Mr Speaker

The hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) invariably has a sunny disposition, so it is always a pleasure to call him.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab)

I am very grateful, Mr Speaker. I know the Prime Minister has talked about addressing the things immediately before us first, but can she put her mind to the fact that the spring statement is due on 13 March? How will today's statement affect that?

The Prime Minister

The spring statement will still go ahead.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con)

I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, which bears the welcome hallmarks of British pragmatism and common sense, and I will continue to vote for her deal. She will be aware that 29 March is cast in statute law. Can she assure me and the House that, in the hopefully unlikely circumstance that we need to extend article 50, she will find Government time to ensure that we can vote on it in a proper and meaningful way?

The Prime Minister

I give my hon. Friend the reassurance he seeks that if the House rejects the meaningful vote and then votes not to leave with no deal, and then votes for a short, limited extension, we will bring forward the legislation necessary to put that in place.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab)

The Prime Minister has described her discussions with the EU as constructive. I wanted to ask what sympathy there has been in those discussions for a short extension to article 50, but she has already made it clear that she cannot answer that question because she has not had any such discussions, so when is she going to start them? At the moment, she has absurdly and irresponsibly outlined a course of action with no knowledge of whether it will be acceptable to the European Union. She therefore cannot bring the motion. If she did, and if the House went for it and the European Union said no, where would it leave us in the two weeks that would be left before 29 March?

The Prime Minister

If we were in a position where we wanted to extend article 50, it would be necessary to get the agreement of the European Union to do that. Time and again, I am asked to listen to the views of this Parliament. What I have set out in my statement is that if we were in that circumstance, a motion would be brought forward and it would be for this House to decide whether it wished to ask for an extension to article 50, and that decision would then be taken to the European Union.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC)

I must admit to being somewhat confused following the statement, so can the Prime Minister confirm that when we vote against the deal on 12 March, as we undoubtedly will, it leads to a vote on no deal on 13 March, and that when we vote against no deal again on 13 March it leads to a vote on extending article 50 on 14 March and, if we vote for extending article 50 on 14 March, that leads to no deal coming back on the table for the duration of the extended negotiations? Is this not the political equivalent of swimming round in circles?

The Prime Minister

I refer the hon. Gentleman to the timetable I set out in my statement. I am working to bring back a deal that this House is able to agree.

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

The Prime Minister announced today that she will start the process of extending article 50 on 14 March. However, it is a two-way process. If the European Union partners are unable to deliver in 11 working days, will she revoke article 50 to stop a no deal?

The Prime Minister

Revoking article 50 is not something that can be done for a limited period of time. It means staying in the European Union, and we will not do that. We will honour the result of the referendum.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD)

The Prime Minister's argument goes, "We are leaving the EU because 17.4 million people voted for it." Let's face it, her passionate rejection of putting her deal in front of the people again is because 17.4 million people voted for "something". Can she tell us roughly how many of the 17.4 million people voted for her deal and how many, like the protesters outside, voted for leaving without a deal?

The Prime Minister

Let me say to the hon. Lady that 17.4 million people voted to leave the EU and that is what we will do.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab)

On a scale of one to 10, where one is low and 10 is high, how likely is it that the Prime Minister will get any meaningful changes to her withdrawal agreement?

The Prime Minister

I do not operate on those terms. What I operate on is going out there and working hard to get the changes that can be brought back to this House to get a deal.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)

The Prime Minister has so far been rather slippery and spun her way out of answering a direct question that has been put by many Members across this House, so it begs to be asked again: when this House votes on taking no deal off the table, will she and her Government vote for or against that? Yes or no, straight question.

The Prime Minister

I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I have given earlier.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op)

The Prime Minister will surely recognise that the economic uncertainty around Brexit, which is motivating many businesses, particularly those trading in services, to disinvest in part from the UK, is related not only to the events—or not—that are approaching in terms of 29 March, but to the nature of the future trade deal that Britain negotiates with the EU. Given that there is no certainty that Britain will be able to negotiate that trade deal by the end of the transition period coming up, should we not extend article 50 for longer than the three months she has suggested to allow more time for those meaningful future trade negotiations at least to get started properly?

The Prime Minister

The detail of that trade deal for the future and the future economic and security partnership cannot start to be discussed until we are a third country: it cannot start until after we have left the EU. So extending article 50 does not enable those detailed legal discussions to take place; it merely means that they would be further delayed. [Interruption.] It is true.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP)

What happens if the House votes against extending article 50 on 14 March? We would find ourselves having voted to leave on 29 March on the Thursday, but not being able to leave with a deal because we voted against it on the Tuesday and not being able to leave without a deal because we voted against that on the Wednesday. If we have to leave and we cannot leave with a deal and we cannot leave without one, what happens after that? Is it significant that the day after that is the Ides of March?

The Prime Minister

I say to the hon. Gentleman that this House will have decisions to take and it will have to look at the consequences of those decisions, but the easy way to ensure that he is not in the position that he sets out is to vote for the deal when we bring the meaningful vote back.

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

The Prime Minister seems incapable of thinking more than one move ahead. Clearly, she is more of a draughts player than a chess player. Let me spell out the issues here: the Prime Minister's deal has already been defeated and the House has already rejected leaving on no-deal terms. I do not see that situation changing in the next few days, so in all probability the House will vote to extend article 50. But what will the Prime Minister do, because the 27 EU states have said that they will agree to an extension only on the basis of a general election or a referendum of some description. What will the Prime Minister's negotiating basis be? What will she do if one of the EU27 happens to scupper this by vetoing it?

The Prime Minister

The hon. Gentleman has layered assumption on assumption and on assumption in his question. The first stage is for us to ensure that we can bring back a deal from the European Union with the changes that this House has required such that this House will support it and we can leave on 29 March with a deal.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Ind)

In her remarks at the very beginning, the Prime Minister said:

“The very credibility of our democracy is at stake.”

I agree with her, because this House voted against leaving the EU with no deal and yet this Conservative Government have not abided, in their approach, with the decision of this parliamentary democracy. So democracy is being treated with contempt by an overbearing Government. Is it not the fact that there is a conspiracy between an incompetent Conservative Government and an incompetent Labour leadership to facilitate Brexit, against the needs, interests and wishes of the majority of people in this country?

The Prime Minister

First, this House voted on 29 January that it would support leaving the EU with a withdrawal agreement, provided there were changes to the backstop. It voted to support no hard border in Northern Ireland and leaving with a deal. Secondly, it is incumbent on all of us to ensure that we do

deliver on Brexit. I am sure the hon. Gentleman stood on a manifesto to respect the result of the referendum. I stood on a manifesto to respect the result of the referendum and that is what I am doing.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab)

The Prime Minister has always said that she would not extend article 50, but I welcome the fact that she is now saying that she may get to the stage where she will extend it—I hope she would get there a lot sooner. On what grounds will she be seeking to extend it? What would she be seeking to achieve?

The Prime Minister

As I made clear earlier, I do not want to see us extending article 50. I want to see us getting a deal agreed and through this House, such that we can leave on 29 March with a deal. It will be up to this House to determine, in a vote, whether or not it wishes to extend article 50 if that meaningful vote is rejected.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op)

For the record, and this will not be a surprise to anybody, let me say that I will not, shall not and cannot vote for a second referendum, regardless of how much lipstick is put on it in what it is called. I think that in their heart of hearts both the Front Benchers from my party and the Government know that a majority does not exist in this House for a second referendum. That is a distraction from the main purpose of our job, which is to find a deal. I have spoken to the Prime Minister about workers' rights, funding for our towns post-Brexit and what we need to do to find a way through this. Some of my colleagues have labelled those things as bribes, but they are wrong; what we are trying to do is find a constructive way forward. So in the spirit of that constructive dialogue, the Leader of the Opposition wrote to the Prime Minister to set out changes to the political declaration—not the withdrawal agreement—that would make the deal acceptable to the Labour party. May I ask the Prime Minister to seriously consider and reflect upon those, because the only way she will get a majority in this House and the majority to implement the legislation going forward is if there is a deal that is supported by the sensible mainstream bulk of both parties?

The Prime Minister

First, on the issue of funding for towns around this country, when I stood on the doorstep of No. 10 when I first became Prime Minister I was clear that I wanted a country that works for everyone. What the hon. Gentleman has referred to fits right into that desire and policy of ensuring that we are responding to the needs of people across the whole country. On the other question he has raised, the Leader of the Opposition did write to me with a number of issues and I have responded to that in writing, because a number of points he has made are actually already reflected in the political declaration. There are a number of other issues where we have taken this forward, for example, as I said today, in relation to workers' rights. My team have been able to have one further meeting with the Labour Front-Bench team and we are happy to have further meetings with them should they be willing to have them.

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

Highlands and Islands Enterprise carried out a survey of businesses and firms in the highlands and islands and found that 70% of those businesses see Brexit as a significant risk for their future. More worryingly, only some 13% of these firms see themselves as being adequately prepared for Brexit. Two weeks ago, the Prime Minister gave me a helpful answer on the shared prosperity fund. I wonder whether, in the same spirit, she would consider asking Ministers or appropriate officials to meet me, representatives of HIE and business representatives from the far north of Scotland to discuss the issue and identify the best way forward.

The Prime Minister

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The Business Secretary has indicated that he or a Minister in his Department would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman.

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

Mr Speaker, you will know that there is a Bill on the Order Paper today, with a Second Reading due on 13 March, to give the public a vote on the deal or the option of staying in the EU should they refuse it. Does the Prime Minister agree that, contrary to what she said before, this is not going back on the result of the referendum, but going forward, because it is asking people who voted leave in good faith whether what is being delivered is a reasonable representation of that? For example, Honda workers did not vote to leave their jobs when they voted to leave. Given that she has changed her mind on the article 50 deferral, will she not give the British people the right to change their mind in the light of the facts and give them a final vote on the deal?

The Prime Minister

Honda made it very clear that its announcement was related to changes in the global car market and not to the issue of Brexit. I have answered the question on a vote. It is so important that we actually deliver on the result of the referendum and that we do not go back to the people and ask them to think again, which is what the hon. Gentleman is suggesting.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op)

If this process was at all “simples”, it would be comparethesinglemarket.com, whereas the Prime Minister seems to be very much stuck in confused.com territory. For us to get a majority in this House behind any kind of deal, the Prime Minister is going to have to decide fundamentally who she wants to negotiate with. There will not be a deal that will satisfy her hardliners in the European Research Group and the majority of MPs in this House. Those two views are just not compatible, so please, put the country ahead of party interest and find a deal that can command the majority of support in this House.

The Prime Minister

I know who I am negotiating with: the deal will be negotiated between the UK Government and the European Union. This House made clear on 29 January the basis on which it was willing to accept a deal.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP)

The Prime Minister again mentioned workers’ rights in her statement, yet the explanatory notes on the four statutory instruments that have been in Committee so far acknowledge that those statutory instruments do indeed weaken workers’ and employment protections. Does that not show that the Government’s promises on workers’ rights are entirely hollow, that the best way to protect workers’ rights is to remain in the European Union, and that demands for a second vote are entirely valid and legitimate?

The Prime Minister

The commitments I gave and references I made in my statement in relation to workers’ rights are of course looking to what we would do in the situation where we have left the European Union. We want to continue to enhance workers’ rights. As a Government we are already enhancing workers’ rights—for example, through the work we have done with the Taylor review and the response to the Taylor report. The Government have a commitment to enhance workers’ rights. The commitment that I have given is for those who are concerned that the European Union might in future take steps forward in relation to workers’ rights and, if we were not a member of the European Union, we

would not automatically be responding to that. What I have said is that when standards change in the European Union, we would ensure that Parliament would have a vote on whether this United Kingdom would follow that or not.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Ind)

This House has already voted against no deal and it has already voted against the Prime Minister's agreement. The process outlined today is indicative of the Prime Minister's shocking inability to take the very difficult decision that has to be taken, which is simply that the best way to serve the national interest is to accept that in the end the only way to get her deal over the line is to offer in return a confirmative public vote. That is the only way in which this House will accept her deal. The offer is on the table—will she accept it?

The Prime Minister

I responded to the issue of a confirmatory vote, second referendum or people's vote earlier in response to a number of other questions. I respect the way in which the hon. Lady has been a campaigner for this issue and has been consistent in that, but the best way to ensure that we get a deal through this House is to do what we are doing, which is working with the European Union to find the changes that this House indicated were such that with them it would be willing to support a deal.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP)

Last week, the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee released a report, backed unanimously by its members, on the issue of disinformation, particularly in relation to electoral campaigns. Given the release of that report and the questions that surround the leave campaigns, some of which amount to fraud on an industrial scale, before she proceeds any further, why has the Prime Minister not set up a judge-led public inquiry with the power to summon evidence and witnesses, to determine whether she is proceeding on the basis of a fraudulent campaign and a fraudulent result?

The Prime Minister

When people came to vote in the 2016 referendum, the British people knew what they were voting on, and 17.4 million of them voted to leave the European Union. We should respect that vote.

Bill Presented

Terms of Withdrawal from the EU (Referendum) (No. 2) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Geraint Davies, supported by Mr David Lammy, Caroline Lucas, Thelma Walker, Daniel Zeichner and Tom Brake, presented a Bill to require the holding of a referendum in which one option is to approve the withdrawal agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union and the other option is for the United Kingdom to remain a member of the European Union; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Wednesday 13 March, and to be printed (Bill 340).