

HOUSE OF COMMONS HANSARD

European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018

29 January 2019

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[Relevant documents: Eleventh Report from the Exiting the European Union Committee, Response to the vote on the Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration: Options for Parliament, HC 1902; and Twelfth Report from the Exiting the European Union Committee, Response to the vote on the Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration: Assessing the Options, HC 1908.]

Mr Speaker

I have provisionally selected the following amendments in the following order: (a) in the name of the Leader of the Opposition, Jeremy Corbyn; (o) in the name of the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber, Mr Ian Blackford; (g) in the name of the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield, Dominic Grieve; (b) in the name of the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford, Yvette Cooper; (j) in the name of the hon. Member for Leeds West, Rachel Reeves; (i) in the name of the right hon. Member for Meriden, Dame Caroline Spelman; and (n) in the name of the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West, Sir Graham Brady. Reference may be made in debate to any of the amendments on the Order Paper, including those I have not selected.

For the benefit of right hon. and hon. Members, and of those observing our proceedings, I will set out concisely what will happen at the end of today's debate. At 7 o'clock, I will first invite the Leader of the Opposition to move his amendment. If his amendment (a) is agreed to, amendment (o) falls, and I will invite the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield to move his amendment (g), and so on down the list. If amendment (a) is disagreed to, I will invite the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber to move his amendment (o). When amendment (o) has been decided, we will move to amendment (g), and so on down the list. If amendment (b) is agreed to, amendment (j) falls. At the end, I will put to the House the original question in the name of the Prime Minister, as amended, if amendments have been made, or in its original form, if no amendments have been agreed. To move the main motion, I call the Prime Minister.

13:51:00

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May)

I beg to move,

That this House, in accordance with the provisions of section 13(6)(a) and 13(11)(b)(i) and 13(13)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, has considered the Written Statement titled "Statement under Section 13(4) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018" and made on 21 January 2019, and the Written Statement titled "Statement under Section 13(11)(a) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018" and made on 24 January 2019.

Over the past few weeks, this House has left no one in any doubt about what it does not want. It does not want to leave the EU without a deal, because that would hurt our economy and disrupt people's lives. It does not want to hold a general election, because it would waste time, increase

division and solve none of the problems we face. Indeed, this House renewed its confidence in Her Majesty's Government a fortnight ago. Neither do I see anything approaching a majority across the House to hold a second referendum. Indeed, the leaders of the so-called "People's Vote" campaign obviously agree with me, because they declined even to table an amendment to put that into effect. I also accept, however, that this House does not want the deal I put before it in the form it currently exists. The vote was decisive, and I listened.

The world knows what this House does not want. Today, we need to send an emphatic message about what we do want. I believe that that must include honouring the votes of our fellow citizens and completing the democratic process that began when this House voted overwhelmingly to hold the referendum and then voted to trigger article 50 and which saw the vast majority of us elected on manifestos pledging to see Brexit through.

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

At the November European Council, the Prime Minister pleaded with other European leaders, telling them that her deal was not only the best deal but the only possible deal—a statement she repeated time and again, including in this House. We now hear from her spokespeople at No. 10 that she wants to rip up the withdrawal agreement and open up the whole process again. Why would other European leaders agree to that?

The Prime Minister

I gently suggest that the hon. Gentleman listen to my speech before asking questions of that sort.

Seeing Brexit through means reaching an agreement that works for this country and our people and for the other 27 nations of the European Union, including our nearest neighbour, Ireland. It means listening to the message being sent by the great manufacturing firms that employ millions of our constituents that they need an implementation period and a free trade area with our nearest market. It means protecting the security partnerships that keep us safe. It means caring about every part of this United Kingdom, including the people of Northern Ireland, who should be just as much the concern of each one of us in this Union Parliament as their fellow citizens in England, Scotland and Wales. We need a good deal that sets us on course for a bright future.

That is what I believe this House wants. It is what this Government want, it is what I want, and it is what the British people want. Today, we have the chance to show the European Union what it will take to get a deal through this House of Commons and to move beyond the confusion, division and uncertainty that now hangs over us and on to the bright, new, close, open relationship we want to build and can build with our European friends in the years ahead.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP)

The Prime Minister knows that her Treasury analysis shows that every single plan for Brexit makes us poorer. If she is confident of her plan, will she publish it?

The Prime Minister

We published an economic analysis, along with other analyses, and they showed that the Government's proposal was the best deal for honouring the referendum and providing protection for jobs and the economy in this country. I know the hon. Gentleman does not agree, because he does not want to honour the referendum result, but I think it is our duty to honour it.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab)

The Prime Minister has had some strong words for the House for not forming an alternative consensus to her deal, but she is now supporting the Brady amendment, and so will be voting

against her own deal. How does she expect the House to provide an alternative when she is voting against her own deal?

The Prime Minister

Time and again, Opposition Members have stood up and asked me to listen to the House. Now I come to the House having listened to the House, and Members say I should not have.

The way to make clear what it will take to agree a deal is to reject the amendments that state and restate once again what we do not want and back instead the amendment that shows what this House needs in order to agree a deal.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con)

The Prime Minister is absolutely right about honouring the referendum result. Millions of people across the north of England voted in huge numbers to leave the EU, and many of them went out and re-elected Labour MPs who stood on a solemn commitment to make good on the referendum result. Is it not the case that if any Member of Parliament representing a northern leave constituency votes for amendment (b) this evening, they will be voting to dishonour the referendum result?

The Prime Minister

My hon. Friend makes an important point. It is up to every Member to remember the manifesto on which they were elected. Some 80% of the votes cast at the general election were cast for parties that said they would honour the referendum result, and that is what we need to do, and we can honour it by showing tonight what it will take to enable this House to agree a deal on the basis of which we can leave the EU.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD)

The Prime Minister now no longer favours the backstop arrangement she negotiated and instead is in favour of alternative arrangements. Will she set out for the House what those alternative arrangements are?

The Prime Minister

The right hon. Gentleman refers to alternative arrangements as if it is a phrase that has suddenly come into use. As I will mention later, the deal we negotiated allows for alternative arrangements.

I would like to turn to the amendments. I appreciate the spirit of the amendment tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman). I, too, want to avoid leaving without a deal. I have heard the concerns and anxieties of businesses and families around the country who worry about what would happen if we left without a deal, and I do not want to put at risk all the hard work that has seen this Government deliver record high employment; the joint lowest unemployment in 45 years and wages growing at their fastest rate in a decade.

That said, my right hon. Friend's amendment is missing the other half of the equation, for unless we are to end up with no Brexit at all, the only way to avoid no deal is to agree a deal. That is why I want to go back to Brussels with the clearest possible mandate to secure a deal that this House can support. That means sending the clearest possible message not about what the House does not want, but about what we do want.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP)

Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister

I am just going to make a little more progress. I am always generous in taking interventions, as the hon. Gentleman knows.

I know that some Members have been concerned that this debate could be the last chance to vote on their desire to avoid a no deal, so I want to reassure the House that it is not. We will bring a revised deal back to the House for a second meaningful vote as soon as we possibly can.

Pete Wishart

Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister

If the hon. Gentleman wants to comment on what I am saying about the process that the Government will follow, I suggest that he should wait until I have completed what I am saying. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker

Order. Let me very gently say to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) and his hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) that both of them are very senior figures in the land, as Chairs of important Select Committees of the House, and they should behave with the decorum that befits their high status.

The Prime Minister

First of all, as I have said, we will bring a revised deal back to this House for a second meaningful vote as soon as we possibly can. While we will want the House to support that deal, if it did not, we would—just as before—table an amendable motion for debate the next day. Furthermore, if we have not brought a revised deal back to this House by Wednesday 13 February, we will make a statement and, again, table an amendable motion for debate the next day. So the House will have a further opportunity to revisit this question of leaving without a deal. Today, we can and must instead focus all our efforts on securing a good deal with the EU that enables us to leave in a smooth and orderly way on 29 March.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab)

The Prime Minister is, of course, right that there is more clarity about what the House does not want than about what it does want, but in order to get that clarity about what the House wants, why will she not agree to a series of indicative votes on all the substantive options before us—not the process but the substance, including a comprehensive customs union?

The Prime Minister

The hon. Lady and others—indeed, Members on her party's Front Bench—had the opportunity to table indicative votes. Did they do so? No. They tabled something that said, "Well, what's the answer? Let's have a few more votes in the future, possibly, maybe, if we think that it might be useful at some stage."

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)

This morning there was some kite-flying about a so-called Tory Brexit compromise which would still take Scotland out of the EU, would probably require an extension of article 50, and proposes what has already been ruled out. Does that not further emphasise the fact that this Prime Minister's Brexit policy has been about the Tory party, first, last and always?

The Prime Minister

My Brexit policy, and the policy of the Government, has been about the vote that took place in 2016 in the referendum, and about delivering on leaving the European Union.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con)

Does the Prime Minister agree that it is important for us to honour the referendum and the vote of 2016? Will she rule out any extension of article 50 and any wrecking tactics from the Labour party, and make sure that we leave on 29 March?

The Prime Minister

I absolutely agree that we need to deliver on the result of the referendum. Let me add that when people talk about things such as delaying article 50, that does not resolve the issue of what deal we should have in leaving the European Union. What we can do today is send a clear message to Brussels about what the House wants to see changing in the withdrawal agreement in order to be able to support it.

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

rose—

Pete Wishart

rose—

The Prime Minister

I will give way to the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie), and then I will relent and give way to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart).

Mr Leslie

I want to find out what has changed since the Prime Minister said to the House just a fortnight ago:

“some...wanted to see changes to the withdrawal agreement, a unilateral exit mechanism from the backstop, an end date or rejecting the backstop...The simple truth is that the EU was not prepared to agree to this and rejecting the backstop...means no deal.”—[Official Report, 14 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 826.]

Does she still agree with herself?

The Prime Minister

If the hon. Gentleman will wait, I shall come on to talk about the issue of the backstop. We retain absolutely our commitment to a way of ensuring that we deliver on the commitment to no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. However, the hon. Gentleman may have noticed that actually we lost a vote, and we have been listening to Members on both sides of the House. The hon. Gentleman and his right hon. and hon. Friends say to me that I must recognise that we lost a vote. Yes, that is why we are here, looking at what it will take to ensure that we get a deal through the House.

Pete Wishart

rose—

The Prime Minister

I said to the hon. Gentleman that I would give way.

Pete Wishart

I am very grateful to the Prime Minister for relenting. She is just about to rip up her backstop, and we are all wishing that she would get on with it and tell the House exactly what she plans to do. That involves an agreement—[Interruption.] Hold on a minute. That involves an agreement—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker

Order. I know that Conservative Members find the hon. Gentleman mildly provocative—[Laughter]—and no, he is not in an isolated category in that regard—but he must be heard.

Pete Wishart

Thank you, Mr Speaker. I shall continue to be mildly provocative, if I can, by asking the following question. This is an agreement with the European Union. What happens when the European Union says no to the Prime Minister again?

The Prime Minister

The first step in all this is for the House to make clear what it wants to see in relation to changes. The hon. Gentleman says that he wants me to get on with it and actually talk about what I want to talk about. If he were not jumping up and down all the time, I might be able to get on with it.

Let me now turn to the amendments from my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) and the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). I understand the concerns that led to the tabling of the amendments, but I have the most profound doubts about the consequences to which they would lead.

Both amendments seek to create and exploit mechanisms that would allow Parliament to usurp the proper role of the Executive. Such actions would be unprecedented, and could have far-reaching and long-term implications for the way in which the United Kingdom is governed and the balance of powers and responsibilities in our democratic institutions. I am sure that, as former Ministers of the Crown, both Members must know that. So, while I do not question their sincerity in trying to avoid a no-deal Brexit, to seek to achieve that through such means is, I believe, deeply misguided, and not a responsible course of action.

Furthermore, neither amendment actually delivers on the best way of avoiding no deal, which is, as I have said, for the House to approve a deal with the European Union. The amendment tabled by my right hon. and learned Friend would see six full days given over to debates and votes on alternative plans, on which we could have voted today. With just 59 days left before we are due to leave the European Union, the way in which to deliver Brexit and avoid a no deal is to focus all our energies and time on getting a revised deal that both the House and the European Union can agree to support.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab)

Does the Prime Minister not understand that the reason we are in this mess is that she chose to go and negotiate without first commanding the support of a majority in the House? Does she also not understand that, whether we are talking about the option that has been put forward by her Back Benchers or other options, she will need two things for that to succeed—time, and the opportunity for the House to agree on the negotiating mandate? The amendments provide that time and that opportunity. Why is the Prime Minister opposing them?

The Prime Minister

The hon. Gentleman has an opportunity today to agree the negotiating mandate for going back to Brussels by supporting the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady).

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con)

My right hon. Friend will have seen that the amendment that I tabled goes solely to process, not to outcome. But is it not the case that the House has never had a proper opportunity to debate options, and to do it in a reasoned way? What the Prime Minister is asking the House to do again today is to suddenly adopt a measure that the Government have signed up to at the last moment, and to say that that should be the route we should take. Surely that illustrates the precise problem that the House has had throughout. Let me make it clear to my right hon. Friend that the purpose of my amendment is to give the House the space in which to find where the majority lies, and I commend it to her.

The Prime Minister

Let me say first that we have that opportunity today. I, and others, have been listening and talking to Members on both sides of the House about the issues that they have raised—apart from the Leader of the Opposition, who did not want to come and talk to me. I shall mention a number of those issues later in my speech, but one of them, which has been raised consistently by Members, is the backstop. We have an opportunity to give a clear message to the European Union on this matter today, and I also say to my right hon. and learned Friend that I am sure he has thought through very carefully the longer-term implications of the moves proposed tonight in the amendments that he and the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford have put forward and the implications they have for the relationship between the Executive and Parliament in the future.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con)

Does the Prime Minister also get the idea that the European Union too wants to do a deal with the United Kingdom? We have a £95 billion deficit with it, the Germans sell us 850,000 cars every year, we buy 20% of all the prosecco produced in Italy: does she agree with me that the European Union wishes to carry on trading with the United Kingdom in the way it currently does?

The Prime Minister

I am going to reference this later on, and I think there is a willingness on the other side—the European Union—to agree a deal with the UK, but what it clearly said when the meaningful vote was lost was that it wanted to know what the UK wanted to see happening in relation to the deal, and that is an opportunity that we have today.

The Prime Minister

I will give way to the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) and then I will make some progress.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind)

I am grateful to the Prime Minister for allowing me to intervene at this early stage.

The Prime Minister is trying to encourage this House to vote for an amendment that uses the words

“alternative arrangements to avoid a hard border”

on the island of Ireland. Forgive me, Prime Minister, if I say that those words are nebulous. They are nebulous; the Prime Minister has a duty to spell out to this House before we vote what those alternative arrangements are, and how on earth the other 27 EU member states are expected to agree to this revised arrangement before Brexit date on 29 March.

The Prime Minister

The amendment standing in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady) and other hon. and right hon. Members does indeed reference the issue of “alternative arrangements”. That term is recognised in the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration in terms of the deal, and I am going on to reference a number of options that have been brought forward in relation to that particular term.

The Prime Minister

I am going to make some progress.

The amendment in the name of the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford does not rule out no deal; it simply delays the point of decision, and the policy dilemmas, the choices, the trade-offs that we face as a Parliament will not go away if we postpone exit day. Her amendment offers absolutely no positive suggestions to address them. Furthermore I believe that the EU is very unlikely to agree to extend article 50 without a credible plan for how we are going to approve a deal. So whatever the right hon. Lady’s intention, I think the practical consequences of her amendment would be not to rule out no deal, but to delay Brexit, and that is not a course of action that this House should support.

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

The Prime Minister

I will of course give way to the right hon. Lady.

Yvette Cooper

If the Prime Minister does not get agreement either from the EU or this Parliament to her next course of action, is she ruling out any extension of article 50?

The Prime Minister

I have been very clear, as I said earlier, about the process we will follow: if we get a deal we will bring it back to this House, or if we have not got a deal we will give this House opportunities through amendable motions to state its view as to what should happen at that point in time.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con)

Does my right hon. Friend agree that throughout the history of the European Union it has always worked to deadlines, and the British people now want us to get on and finish the job they have given us?

The Prime Minister

I thank my hon. Friend for what he has pointed out and particularly for the fact that, as he said, the British people just want to see this done. They want us to leave; they want us to leave with a deal.

The Prime Minister

I will give way to the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford, as I have referenced her.

Yvette Cooper

It is really important that the House has some clarity on this. If the Prime Minister is saying that there will be future votes in which Parliament can make some decisions about no deal or not, she will know that her credibility is very limited because she said there would be a vote in December and then pulled it at the last minute. We therefore need some clarity from her now: is she saying

that if Parliament votes for an extension of article 50 to avoid no deal on 29 March she will respect that?

The Prime Minister

There is a very simple point: extending article 50 does not rule out no deal. [Interruption.] No, I am sorry; I have said this before, but I apologise to the House as I am going to repeat it again. There are two ways in which it is possible to rule out no deal. One is by revoking article 50 and not leaving. That is the SNP's view, but it is not my view, it is not the Government's view, and I believe that it is not the view of the British people and is not the view of the majority of Members of this House. The other way to ensure we do not leave with no deal is to agree a deal. The stage we are at at the moment is that the House of Commons has rejected the deal that the Government agreed with the European Union when we brought that back, and it rejected it with our having achieved further reassurances; I am going to go on to say what I believe is now required by this House, from the conversations and discussions I have had with hon. and right hon. Members of this House. As I have set out—

Yvette Cooper

Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister

The right hon. Lady wants to intervene again; I will take another intervention from her, and then if she will excuse me I will make some progress.

Yvette Cooper

I am very grateful to the Prime Minister for giving way again, but I am simply trying to understand what she is saying. She cannot have it both ways: she cannot be saying that she absolutely will leave on 29 March in all circumstances, whatever happens, and then simultaneously say that there will be an opportunity for Parliament to have some future votes and decide what happens next if there is no deal. The question here is whether or not she would ever contemplate any extension of article 50 to get a bit more time to sort things out to avoid no deal—yes or no.

The Prime Minister

As I said earlier in my speech, we will bring a revised deal back to this House for a second meaningful vote as soon as we possibly can. If it were not supported by the House, we would table an amendable motion for debate the next day, and if we have not brought a revised deal back to this House by Wednesday 13 February we will make a statement and again table an amendable motion for debate the next day. The right hon. Lady references the timetable up to 29 March; actually this House voted for that timetable when it voted to trigger article 50.

I would like to move on to the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab)

Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister

No, I am going to make some progress.

Ms Eagle
rose—

The Prime Minister

No.

We should not indulge the amendment from the Leader of the Opposition. First he wanted a comprehensive customs union, then it was a new customs union and now it is a permanent customs union. Last week I asked him whether he means accepting the common external tariff, accepting the common commercial policy, accepting the Union customs code, or accepting EU state aid rules: he had no answers then; he has no answers now; he hasn't got a clue. He is still facing both ways on whether Labour would keep freedom of movement, and last night he whipped his MPs to oppose the Bill that would end free movement and introduce a skills-based system. And he is still facing both ways on a second referendum: his amendment calls for legislation for a public vote, but we still do not know whether he would use it or what the question would be.

I know that many Labour voters and MPs, and others in the Labour movement, are frustrated by the Leader of the Opposition's approach. It is surely time for him to step up to the responsibility of being Leader of the Opposition and finally sit down with me and talk about how we can secure support in this House for a deal. As I said last week, he has been willing to sit down with Hamas, Hezbollah and the IRA without preconditions; it is time he did something in our national interest, not against it.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab)
rose—

The Prime Minister

No, I am going to make some progress.

None of the amendments I have addressed so far will ensure that we deliver Brexit. Instead, they simply provide more arguments against action and more reasons to stand still. Rather than setting out a plan to make Brexit work, they create further delay. And delay without a plan is not a solution; it is a road to nowhere.

Ms Angela Eagle
Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister

No. I have said to the hon. Lady that I am going to make progress.

I am not prepared to stand still and put at risk either the Brexit that the people of this country voted for or the economic success they have worked so hard to secure. After this House gave its verdict on the withdrawal agreement, I stood at this Dispatch Box and pledged to work with the House to determine what steps to take next, and in the two weeks since, I have done just that. [Interruption.] Labour Front Benchers say that I have not done that. Actually, the only people I have not been able to talk to about this are the Labour party's Front Benchers, because they decided not to come.

I have listened to the House, met MPs from all parties, and spoken with and listened to Members of the European Parliament, Heads of the devolved Administrations, senior trade unionists and the leaders of Britain's biggest businesses. From those conversations, it is obvious that three key changes are needed.

First, we must be more flexible, open and inclusive in how we engage this House in our approach to negotiating our future partnership with the European Union. Secondly, we must and will embed the strongest possible protections for workers' rights and the environment. The Government will not

allow the UK leaving the EU to result in any lowering of standards in relation to employment, environmental protection or health and safety. Furthermore, we will ensure that, after exit day, the House has the opportunity to consider any measure approved by EU institutions that strengthens any of those protections. As I have set out before, we will consider legislation where necessary to ensure that those commitments are binding. To that end, in the coming days we will have further talks with the trade unions and MPs across the House to flesh out exactly how we can ensure that their concerns on those fronts are met. My message to Britain's workers, in factories, offices, warehouses and right across our country, is that you can rest assured that the Government will deliver for you.

Mr Dhesi

A clear and concise message needs to be given to the EU and to our nation. The Prime Minister does not want no-deal, business in Slough and in the rest of the country do not want no-deal, and the unions, which she has just mentioned, do not want no-deal, so what is the problem in putting that down in black and white?

The Prime Minister

In order to deliver what the hon. Gentleman wants and ensure that we do not leave with no deal, we need to agree a deal. What we are doing today is looking at a series of amendments. I will come on shortly to an amendment that actually sets out a clear view from this House that we can take to the European Union and work to ensure that we can leave with a deal.

The third point that has become clear from discussions is that we must address the concerns of this House over the nature of the Northern Ireland backstop. The fundamental concern is that what is supposed to be a temporary arrangement could in fact become permanent. The message has been unequivocal: this House wants changes to the backstop before it will back a deal.

The Prime Minister

No, I am going to explain the position. That message has come from Conservative Back Benchers, Opposition Members and our confidence and supply partners in the DUP. That is why I believe it is in all our interests for the House to back the amendment tabled by my hon. Friends the Members for Altrincham and Sale West and for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) and others.

The Prime Minister

No, I am going to explain. This amendment will give the mandate I need to negotiate with Brussels an arrangement that commands a majority in this House—one that ensures we leave with a deal and addresses the House's concerns, while guaranteeing no return to the hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland.

What I am talking about is not a further exchange of letters but a significant and legally binding change to the withdrawal agreement. Negotiating such a change will not be easy. It will involve reopening the withdrawal agreement—a move for which I know there is limited appetite among our European partners. But I believe that with a mandate from this House, and supported by the Attorney General, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, I can secure such a change in advance of our departure from the EU.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP)

I welcome what the Prime Minister has said about the need to address the issue of the Northern Ireland backstop, which she is quite right to emphasise as the primary problem. I also welcome the fact that she has said in terms that she will go back and seek the reopening of the withdrawal

agreement. She can be assured of our support in trying to find a solution that avoids any hard border on the island of Ireland as well as any borders within the United Kingdom.

The Prime Minister

I am grateful for the clarity with which the right hon. Gentleman has set out that position. We remain absolutely committed as a Government to ensuring that we have no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, and that any proposals accepted and put forward by this House maintain our precious Union.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con)

I agree with the Prime Minister that the best way to avoid no deal is to put an agreement in place. She will be aware that a surprising combination of Members with very different Brexit views have been coming together to come up with some proposals. We are very grateful to her for the time she has given to engage with us. Will she undertake to ask her officials to consider those proposals seriously and to put them on the table as a possible way of fleshing out the alternative arrangements?

The Prime Minister

My right hon. Friend anticipates what I was going to say. We will be focusing on delivering specific changes that will address the concerns of the House, and I am looking at a range of ways to achieve that. As my right hon. Friend has just said, she and my hon. Friends the Members for Wycombe (Mr Baker), for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) and others have worked to bring forward a serious proposal that we are engaging with sincerely and positively.

The Prime Minister

I will take more interventions in a moment. I can give my right hon. Friend confirmation that we will sit down and work through the proposal in the way she has suggested.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab)

Some 17.4 million people voted for Brexit. The idea that they were duped into doing so is absolute nonsense, so Brexit must be delivered. But it must be a Brexit that protects jobs in my constituency and beyond. Unions and bosses tell me that that requires a permanent customs union or arrangement. Why will the Prime Minister not listen to them?

The Prime Minister

The hon. Lady is absolutely right about ensuring that we deliver on the vote of those 17.4 million people, and I want to deliver on that with a deal that does protect jobs. What we need to ensure is that, as we look to the future relationship, in the free trade area and in the customs arrangements, we remember the necessity of protecting those jobs. What I have also heard very clearly from hon. Members on both sides of the House and, of course, from the trade union leaders I have spoken to is the issue of ensuring that we protect workers' rights. As I have just indicated, we are committed to doing so.

The Prime Minister

I say to all Members of this House that I have already been very generous in taking interventions. I am sure that many Members wish to contribute to the debate, so I will make progress.

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

rose—

The Prime Minister

As I have referenced my hon. Friend in my speech, I will give way to him.

Mr Rees-Mogg

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend and thank her for her very clear assurances that the withdrawal agreement text will be reopened and that she will consider what has been called the Malthouse compromise. May I ask for one more promise, namely that any further detailed agreement will come back and will not be deemed to have been ratified by the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady)?

The Prime Minister

I give my hon. Friend that assurance: it has to and will come back to this House. Legally speaking, ratification of the agreement can take place only in the act of passing the WAB—the withdrawal agreement Bill. That will be the ratification moment for any arrangements.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab)

The Prime Minister has referred repeatedly to protecting workers' rights post-Brexit, but may I take her back to 2017 and my Bill, which was specifically about protecting workers' rights when we leave the European Union on 29 March? Why was that measure not adopted at the time, and if she is so committed to it will she meet me to discuss those elements of the Bill that she is prepared to adopt?

The Prime Minister

We are looking at ways in which we can give that assurance in relation to workers' rights. As I said, we are looking at when legislation would be appropriate and where it would be necessary. I am happy to meet the hon. Lady to go through that issue.

I want to complete what I was saying to my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan). We will indeed engage seriously and positively with the proposals that she has put forward, which were also referenced by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset. The crucial concept that we see within this amendment is the concept of alternative arrangements. As I have already said in this speech, that has already been accepted by the EU as a way out of the backstop. I commend my hon. and right hon. Friends for their willingness to find a solution and I look forward to working with them over the coming days. A number of other colleagues have also suggested ways to achieve that aim, such as securing a time limit to the backstop, or a unilateral exit clause, which we will of course study closely as well. While there are obviously details that need to be worked through, the fact that leading figures from different sides of the argument are coming together to develop proposals shows how much progress has been made over the past few weeks.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green)

Does the Prime Minister recognise that there is no solution in chasing fantasies? The EU has ruled this kind of option out many times. We cannot have an insurance policy based on a technology that does not exist. Will she not recognise that what she is chasing here are heated-up fantasies that have already been rejected by the EU, which depend on technologies that do not exist?

The Prime Minister

Members across the House have put forward a number of proposals on how this issue can be addressed. They are not indulging in fantasies—they are coming forward with serious proposals, on which this Government will work with them.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con)

On the question of our control over our laws, to honour the referendum will my right hon. Friend give instructions to make certain that in any future withdrawal and implementation Bill, there will be an express repeal of the European Communities Act 1972, so as to dovetail with section 1 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, which we have passed?

The Prime Minister

As my hon. Friend knows, in the European Union (Withdrawal) Act, we repealed the 1972 Act. It would be necessary to replicate the impact of some aspects of that Act for the purposes of the implementation period, but I certainly take what my hon. Friend has said. Within the withdrawal agreement Bill that we will need to bring before the House, we will make absolutely clear the arrangements for ensuring that the European Communities Act, and its impacts, do not go beyond the end of the implementation period.

The Prime Minister

I will take more interventions in a little while, but I want to make the point that the essence of any negotiation is to find a mutually acceptable solution. That is the spirit in which both sides have consistently approached these negotiations and that is the spirit in which I will engage with our partners, if this amendment passes.

Some say that there is no point even trying to achieve any change—I am hearing that from some interventions from sedentary positions, and from elsewhere—and that the EU simply will not budge under any circumstances, but in the two years since this House voted to trigger article 50, the EU has made concessions in many areas of the negotiations where people said no ground would ever be given. Today, neither side in this negotiation wants to see the UK leave without a deal. The simple fact is that the deal I reached with the EU has been rejected by this House. In response, the EU has asked us what we want and what this Parliament will accept, and this is Parliament's opportunity to tell them.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP)

Does the Prime Minister agree that, rather than chasing a fantasy, there is now an opportunity, which Michel Barnier himself presented when he told the Irish Government that the EU would look for ways of ensuring that checks could take place without any infrastructure along the border? He even talked about paperless and decentralised arrangements. That is what the EU is saying, so it is obviously not a fantasy, but something we have in common.

The Prime Minister

Those are exactly the issues that we want to work on, and several proposals have been put forward. However, what matters today is that Parliament makes it clear to the EU that the backstop is the issue that needs to be dealt with. This is Parliament's opportunity to respond to the EU, which has said that it wants us to tell it what we want. This is our opportunity to do that. This is not the second meaningful vote. As I have said and repeated, we will bring a revised deal back to the House for just such a vote as soon as possible.

A vote for amendment (n) is a vote to tell Brussels that the current nature of the backstop is the key reason the House cannot support this deal, as many hon. Members have said to me, the media and their constituents over the past few weeks. A vote against that amendment does the opposite. It tells the EU that, despite what people may have said in speeches, tweets and newspaper columns, the backstop is not the problem. It risks sending a message that we are not serious about delivering a Brexit that works for Britain.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab)

The right hon. Lady is not the first Prime Minister to discover that the Conservative party is uniteable and unleadable on Europe. Many others have learnt that lesson. However, as she celebrates having people on different sides of the argument coming together to support an amendment, does she not realise that she has been able to get them to agree to it only because it is so nebulous as to be meaningless?

The Prime Minister

If the hon. Gentleman wants to look for different views about the issue, perhaps he can talk to some of his colleagues. He might try to get the Leader of the Opposition to focus on a detailed proposal for what the Labour party thinks.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con)

I think that Conservative Members are all trying to find a way of getting a deal, and I have been impressed with what the Prime Minister has said today. We will send her back to Brussels to reopen the withdrawal agreement, but will she assure the House that, if we do not agree with what she comes back with, we will still have the right to vote against it?

The Prime Minister

Yes, of course the House will have the right to decide whether it agrees with the agreement that emerges. However, I hope that, when we bring a revised agreement to the House—as I am sure that we will be able to—my hon. Friend will look at it carefully before he determines how to vote.

The Prime Minister

I am conscious of the length of time I have been at the Dispatch Box. Hon. Members want to speak and I will now conclude.

Since the draft withdrawal agreement was published, I have come to the House to discuss it more than half a dozen times. I have been on the Front Bench for many hours of debate, taking hundreds of questions and interventions from hon. Members, and I have been listening.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con)

rose—

The Prime Minister

I indicated that I would not take any more interventions and that I was completing my speech. I am sure that my hon. Friend will have an opportunity, if she catches the Speaker's eye, to speak later.

I have witnessed division and discord, and I have seen passion and anger on all sides, but in the two weeks since the House rejected the withdrawal agreement, I have sensed a growing recognition of the task that has been entrusted to us. Members on all sides have begun to focus on what really matters: delivering the Brexit that Britain voted for while protecting our economy and our people.

We can increasingly see where this consensus lies, and I believe that we are within reach of a deal that this House can stand behind, but the days ahead are crucial. When I go back to Brussels to seek the changes this House demands, I need the strongest possible support behind me. Most of the amendments before us do not provide that. They create a cacophony of voices when this House needs to speak as one. I will never stop battling for Britain, but the odds of success become far longer if this House ties one hand behind my back. I call on the House to give me the mandate I need to deliver a deal this House can support. Do that, and I can work to reopen the withdrawal agreement. Do that, and I can fight for a backstop that honours our commitments to the people of

Northern Ireland in a way this House can support. Do that, and we can leave the EU with a deal that honours the result of the referendum.

The time has come for words to be matched by deeds: if you want to tell Brussels what this House will accept, you have to vote for it; if you want to leave with a deal, you have to vote for it; if you want Brexit, you have to vote for Brexit.

14:39:00

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab)

It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and it is important to start by reminding us all that this whole process was secured only in the teeth of Government opposition, so I start by paying tribute to those MPs who voted with us for Parliament to have a full democratic role in the Brexit process, and especially to the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) for his work in the earlier debates.

Labour has been absolutely clear from the start that there must be a meaningful vote on any negotiated deal. That was raised by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) at the very beginning of this whole Brexit process. Should a deal be defeated in Parliament, as it was decisively, Parliament must have a say on how the Government proceed.

This is a vital issue that affects the future direction of our country and the future facing all of our constituents. It determines the jobs and living standards of our people, the rights of European Union citizens living in Britain who have been deeply stressed by this situation—as have British citizens living across the continent of Europe—our place in the world and our participation and co-operation in Europe-wide projects on issues as vital as security, counter-terrorism and climate change.

Our job must be to bring people together. No matter how anyone in this House campaigned in the referendum, we cannot wish away the votes of 17 million people who voted to leave, any more than we can ignore the concerns of the 16 million who voted to remain. We must have in our minds the views right across the country.

It is therefore right that Members represent their constituents in deciding the way forward on implementing the result of the referendum but, in delivering the result, we have to unite people so as not to create further divisions, stoke xenophobia or allow racism to rear its ugly head in our society. Many communities across this country have been neglected for far too long, lacking decent investment and with too few—

Mr Speaker

Order. The person who has the Floor chooses whether and, if so, when to give way. That is the situation. It is very clear, and it cannot be contradicted. That is all there is to it.

Jeremy Corbyn

What I was saying was—

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab)

Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Jeremy Corbyn

I will give way later to a small number of people. [Interruption.] Listen, the reason why this debate is so short is that the Government decided to take an hour out of it to make a statement that could have been made on any other day, not to mention the fact that the vote was delayed on 11 December, which wound down the clock still further.

Many communities across this country have been neglected for far too long, lacking decent investment and with too few secure and well-paid jobs and too little new industrial development. These are not issues that face Britain alone; they would be recognisable in communities all across Europe, where many people face exactly the same problems.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con)

Contradictory, confused or claptrap. Which of those c's best describes the right hon. Gentleman's policy at the current time?

Jeremy Corbyn

This is a serious debate, and I do not think the hon. Gentleman's intervention has done anything to raise the standard of debate.

It is quite clear to me that our first duty is to block a disastrous no deal, and I hope amendments to that effect will be carried by the House this evening. Labour's amendment (a), which stands in my name and in the name of my colleagues, starts by calling for sufficient time for Parliament to vote on options that prevent leaving with no deal, but whatever happens in the votes that follow, it has now become inevitable that the Government will have to extend article 50 in any scenario. If amendments intended to rule out no deal are defeated, and if this Government are serious about keeping the threat of no deal on the table, they are not even close—not even close—to being prepared, and the exit date would have to be extended.

Even if the Prime Minister's deal were somehow to achieve a majority in this House next month, there is no chance that the necessary primary legislation and an extensive catalogue of secondary legislation—I believe there are over 600 statutory instruments—could clear this place between now and 29 March.

Angela Smith

Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Dhesi

Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Jeremy Corbyn

I give way to my hon. Friend. [Hon. Members: "Oh!"]

Mr Dhesi

I can see that I am very well liked here. Does my right hon. Friend agree that clear, close and collaborative describes the relationship proposed by his amendment? That is why we need a customs union. The unions, Labour members and others are telling us that we need a customs union with our neighbours.

Jeremy Corbyn

I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and, of course, he is right. If we are to protect jobs and industries and maintain living standards, there has to be a customs union.

The Prime Minister

I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. He has just reiterated, as his amendment references, the need for a customs union. Will he now tell the House whether he means accepting the common commercial policy, accepting the common external tariffs, accepting the Union customs code—it is no use asking the shadow Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union—and accepting the EU's state aid rules?

Jeremy Corbyn

Obviously a customs union would be negotiated, would be inclusive and would be designed to ensure that our jobs and investment are protected, that there is frictionless and seamless trade with the European Union, and that we have a say in future trade arrangements—something the Prime Minister has absolutely failed to achieve. The fault for not achieving it lies absolutely with the Prime Minister. She claimed she would have a deal agreed by October, then she delayed the vote by a month, and she still suffered the worst—

Boris Johnson (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con)
rose—

Mr Speaker

Order. The former Foreign Secretary does not seem to be very well versed in the traditions of the House of Commons and debate. [Interruption.] Order. I am telling the right hon. Gentleman what the position is, and he will learn from me. When he seeks to intervene, he waits to hear whether the person on his or her feet is giving way, and the Leader of the Opposition is not giving way. In that case, with the very greatest of respect, it is for the right hon. Gentleman to know his place, which is in his seat.

Jeremy Corbyn

Thank you, Mr Speaker. As I was saying, the fault lies exclusively with the Prime Minister, who missed her own deadline to have a deal agreed by October, and she still suffered the worst defeat of any Government in British history.

Angela Smith
rose—

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

Jeremy Corbyn

I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon).

Jim McMahon

I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. [Interruption.] I am not sure how people in this House believe this will be received by the public watching on TV, but I have to say that the public are sick of the childish antics of people in this House and they want us to come together to find a way through this mess. There are thousands of different views on, and variations of, what people felt and thought they voted for in that referendum, but the one thing we can be certain of is that the referendum leaflet that went to every household in this country did not make any mention of leaving the customs union. Why can we not find agreement on that?

Jeremy Corbyn

I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. The point he makes about the way in which this House debates these matters is important. He has led a local authority, Oldham, brought people together and brought communities together, and achieved things—that is something this Government have lamentably failed to do. If the—

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con)

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I think the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton may have inadvertently misled the House. He claimed that no one had said during the EU referendum that we would be leaving the customs union. In fact, the former Prime Minister said that—

Mr Speaker

Order. Resume your seat, Mr Fabricant. I know you are trying to help the House and I appreciate that—your public spiritedness is well known throughout the House and across the nation—but the hon. Gentleman referred to a leaflet and the contents thereof. Whatever the merits or demerits of that argument, it is not a matter of order for the Chair. It is a matter of political debate, as your grinning countenance suggests you are well aware.

Jeremy Corbyn

Thank you, Mr Speaker. I just ask: is the Prime Minister—

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con)

On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker

I hope it is a genuine point of order.

Rebecca Pow

It is actually an observation really—

Mr Speaker

Order. Resume your seat. [Interruption.] With no disrespect to the hon. Lady, I am not interested in observations. [Interruption.] Order. I am not debating it. I am telling you what the situation is. [Interruption.] It is no good laughing, chuckling away as though it is a matter of great amusement. It is a matter of fact: points of order, yes, observations, no. [Interruption.] No, the hon. Lady has helpfully explained that she had an observation to make. We are very grateful.

Jeremy Corbyn

Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Rees-Mogg

On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker

The hon. Gentleman does know parliamentary procedure. Point of order, Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg.

Mr Rees-Mogg

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This is a genuine point of order. I wonder whether you could guide the House on how Members refuse interventions, because I think the reason there is so much noise is that it is not clear whether the right hon. Gentleman has heard the request for an intervention or not. Your guidance would be extraordinarily helpful.

Mr Speaker

I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman. If I understand his point of order correctly, the answer to it is that the customary method of acknowledging the intention of another Member to intervene, and perhaps the acceptance of that intervention, is a gesticulation with the hand, at which, among other things, the hon. Gentleman excels. [Interruption.] No, no, I think the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) is a bit confused; it is not about the fact that someone seeking to intervene gesticulates, but the fact that the Member on his or her feet signals acceptance. That has not happened and therefore the Leader of the Opposition has the Floor. The position is extraordinarily straightforward.

Angela Smith

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I do wonder, with all the noise in the Chamber and with my being directly behind the Leader of the Opposition, whether my requests for an intervention may not have been heard.

Mr Speaker

I cannot claim to have known that, but I think now that the hon. Lady has issued what might be called a public information notice. We are aware of it, but it is a matter for the Leader of the Opposition to decide. I hope the hon. Lady is satisfied with her efforts.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con)

Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker

Order. [Interruption.] Calm down. I gave a ruling in relation to the point of order, and “Further to that point of order” does not arise.

Jeremy Corbyn

Thank you, Mr Speaker. Is the Prime Minister seriously telling this House that we have to wait until 13 February—

Angela Smith

rose—

Jeremy Corbyn

And put—[Hon. Members: “She’s behind you.”] I can well understand what the Tory MPs are trying to do here. They do not want to hear the debate. They do not want to be part of this debate. They—

Mr Speaker

Order. Many people have talked in recent times about the importance of respect in the Chamber. [Interruption.] No, no, no, I do not require any help from the Government Chief Whip. Let me gently say to him that he has a challenging task, which he discharges to the best of his capabilities, and the House and the nation are grateful to him. The idea that he needs to advise the Leader of the Opposition or the Speaker on how to discharge their responsibilities is, frankly, beyond credulity. He has got one job to do. People will make their assessment of whether and how well he does it. Don’t try doing somebody else’s job. With respect, sir, it is way beyond you.

Jeremy Corbyn

Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Ms Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con)

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in accordance with the rules of this House that the Leader of the Opposition takes interventions only from male members of his party?

Mr Speaker

The answer is that there is no breach of rules whatsoever. The hon. Lady has made her own point, in her own way, and I acknowledge it. No breach of rules has taken place. Order has been maintained. That is clear to me and to the professional advisers to the Chair as well, and I think the hon. Lady knows it. However, she has made her own point, in her own inimitable way.

Jeremy Corbyn

I did take an intervention from the Prime Minister, Mr Speaker. Perhaps the hon. Lady had not noticed that.

Is the Prime Minister seriously telling the House to wait until 13 February and put their faith in her doing negotiations in a couple of weeks that she has failed to do in the past two years? One really wonders how many more ceremonial baubles and promises of ermine will be handed out in vain in an attempt to cajole Conservative MPs to vote for a deal that has been overwhelmingly rejected by this House. The Prime Minister says that a second referendum would be like asking the public to vote again until they give the right answer, but so far that is precisely what she is asking this House to do.

Labour will today back amendments that attempt to rule out this Government's reckless option of allowing the UK to crash out without a deal. Everyone bar the Prime Minister accepts this would be disastrous. The CBI says:

“The projected impact”—

of no deal

“on the UK economy would be devastating”.

Just yesterday, the Federation of Small Businesses called on Members of this House to block no deal. The TUC, representing millions of workers, is also opposed to no deal, as its general secretary, Frances O'Grady, reiterated to me last week. Every Opposition party in this House is opposed to no deal. Many Conservative Members, even Front-Bench and Cabinet Conservative Members, are opposed to no deal. Let me quote the Chancellor, who said recently:

“I clearly do not believe that making a choice to leave without a deal would be a responsible thing to do”.

So, presumably, he too wants no deal ruled out.

Jeremy Corbyn

I am making progress. The Home Secretary has gone further and called for a free vote on the amendment tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). The Labour party will back that amendment tonight, because to crash out without a deal would be deeply damaging for industry and the economy—that is why the Chancellor says it would be irresponsible. I say to my right hon. Friend now that in backing her amendment, we are backing a short window of three months to allow time for renegotiation.

Angela Smith

rose—

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

rose—

Jeremy Corbyn

I will give way to my right hon. Friend.

Yvette Cooper

I want to address the point that my right hon. Friend has raised about my amendment and I do not want to cut across a very difficult wider issue. On his point about the amendment, I reassure my right hon. Friend that the purpose of the amendment and the Bill is not to fix any particular time for any extension, or even to decide now what an extension of article 50 should be; it is simply to give the House the ability to do so at the end of February. I agree that nobody wants to see any unnecessary delays.

Jeremy Corbyn

I thank my right hon. Friend for those remarks and the spirit in which she made them. Her amendment quite clearly has the effect of ruling out no deal on 29 March. Surely that should be good and important for this House. It will not be any comfort, after 29 March, to say, “I told you so” when the lorries are backing up on the M20, cancer patients cannot get medicines and prices are rising in our shops. Tonight, we have the opportunity to take no deal off the table.

When the Prime Minister invited party leaders for talks, I said to her that she must first remove the threat of no deal. If the House today votes to remove the immediate threat of crashing out without a deal on 29 March, as I fervently hope it does and will, I will be happy to meet the Prime Minister to discuss a sensible solution that works for the whole country—which is what the Labour party wants to achieve.

Many of the amendments tabled, including those in the names of my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), and of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) and the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), advocate delaying article 50 to give Parliament more time to break the impasse and avoid the dangers of no deal. If the House votes for any of those amendments, the Prime Minister must accept that an extension to article 50 is a responsible measure to allow time for real renegotiation and to find a deal that can win the support of this House. It will mean that no deal is off the table and that the red lines must change.

Jeremy Corbyn

I am making progress, if I may.

The primary part of Labour’s amendment is about finding a workable solution. That means a new customs union, a strong single market deal and no race to the bottom on workers’ rights, on environmental protections and standards or on consumer standards. The EU chief negotiator Michel Barnier has been clear that

“unanimously the European Council...have always said that if the UK chooses to shift its red lines in future...and go beyond a simple free trade agreement...then the European Union will be immediately ready to...give a favourable response.”

We understand that just this weekend the EU Commission President told the Prime Minister that accepting the case for a permanent customs union would help to solve the issue of the backstop arrangement. Indeed, Ireland's Europe Minister made exactly that point at the weekend, saying:

“The backstop is there because of the red lines that the UK put down”

at the beginning of this process.

We understand that today the Government will back the amendment in the name of the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady)—the Prime Minister said as much—which will require changes to the backstop, but still we have no clarity on what changes they are or which red lines will change to allow that to happen. On the other side, we see that there is flexibility—an apparent willingness now to renegotiate—but only if the red lines change.

Ms Angela Eagle

Does my right hon. Friend share my puzzlement, after listening to the Prime Minister for close to an hour and with many people having asked the question, that we are still no nearer to knowing any detail on what the phrase “alternative arrangements” means, except that the Prime Minister said they were arrangements that were alternative?

Jeremy Corbyn

I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. We are witnessing the long, slow decline of this Government as they run down the clock. They put off the vote then lost the vote. They came to the House today and are now offering more votes next week, then a week later and a week later. They are running down the clock, using the fear of no deal as opposed to the Prime Minister's deal. Her deal was defeated two weeks ago, but the Prime Minister is still to answer the question as to which of her red lines she is prepared to change, or even just be flexible on. It is clear that the obstacle to a solution is the Prime Minister. She is refusing to accept the clearly stated will of this House, which has decisively—in record numbers for a parliamentary vote—defeated her deal, and which is equally clear in its opposition to a disastrous no deal, which I hope and expect will be reiterated tonight.

Jeremy Corbyn

I am going to make progress.

In the absence of any leadership from the Prime Minister, solutions are being put forward from across the House. Those advocating Norway plus or common market 2.0 have worked on a cross-party basis. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), and my hon. Friends the Members for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) and for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell). They are clear that not only do we need full access to the single market but we need a customs union, too. That is why a new comprehensive and permanent customs union has long been Labour's policy. It is a pragmatic solution that would help to deliver the Brexit that people voted for and the frictionless trade that the Prime Minister once promised; that would help to deliver a solution to the Irish backstop; and that would help to deliver a majority across the House for a deal.

Angela Smith

Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Jeremy Corbyn

So far, the Prime Minister has only doubled down on her own defeated deal, saying at last week's Prime Minister's Question Time that her deal delivers

"the benefits of a customs union and the benefits of our own trade policy."—[Official Report, 23 January 2019; Vol. 653, c. 237.]

It does no such thing. The political declaration fails to deliver on the Chequers promise of frictionless trade—it does not even guarantee tariff-free trade. It means that we lose the 40 to 50 trade agreements we have through the EU.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove)
Why is the right hon. Gentleman scared to take an intervention from the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith), a member of the Labour party for 37 years?

Jeremy Corbyn

I thank the Minister for his intervention and his brief statement of his leadership intentions.

As I was saying—[Interruption.]

Angela Smith
rose—

Jeremy Corbyn

I am making progress, Mr Speaker. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker

Order. Is the right hon. Gentleman giving way?

Jeremy Corbyn

indicated dissent.

Mr Speaker

He is not giving way. [Hon. Members: "Oh!"] Order. The House must behave must behave with decorum. Senior Front-Bench Members, who I know would proclaim their commitment to, and I am sure genuinely believe in, courtesy in the Chamber, are witness to deliberate attempts to shout down the Leader of the Opposition. [Interruption.] Order. It will not happen. [Interruption.] Order. The rules of this House are clear. If the Leader of the Opposition wishes to give way, he does so; if he does not wish to do so, he does not have to do so. He will not be shouted down and no amount of inspired and orchestrated attempts to shout him down will work—not today, not tomorrow, not at any time. Drop it. It is not worth it and, actually, you are not very good at it.

Jeremy Corbyn

I am making progress, Mr Speaker—

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind)

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. There may be quite a few people in the country watching this debate. They will not understand that our shouting is one way of seeing whether somebody can maintain a line of argument to his and her colleagues here. Given the damage that this debate is already doing to our standing with the nation, might not he consider taking all the amendments that he did not call, and closing the proceedings early so that we can actually vote on those amendments. The country will understand that, whereas they do not understand this behaviour.

Mr Speaker

I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. I know that he is well-intentioned, but the short answer is no. The timescale for the debate has been set and agreed by the House, and the selection by the Chair has been appropriately made in accordance with the conventions of this House and without demur from colleagues, and it is best that we proceed.

Jeremy Corbyn

I am coming towards the end of my remarks, because I want to ensure that other Members get a chance to speak in this debate.

Simon Hoare

On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker

We will see whether this is a real point of order.

Simon Hoare

I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker. Earlier in this debate, you rightly referred to the expectations of this place of respect and politeness to colleagues. That is a perfectly sensible benchmark to set. In your judgment, sir, and I seek your ruling on this, has the behaviour of the Leader of the Opposition to the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) lived up to your expectations of respect to colleagues?

Mr Speaker

The answer is very simple. Good order has been preserved; nothing disorderly has taken place. I do not want to be unkind to the hon. Gentleman because I know that he is trying to be an apprentice parliamentary expert, but I am afraid that he has quite a few steps on the ladder still to climb.

Jeremy Corbyn

The point that I was making is that we could lose 40 to 50 trade agreements that we have through the European Union, which the International Trade Secretary has so far failed to replicate at all, despite the extraordinary and very bold claims that he made at the beginning of this whole Brexit process.

This is a Government in denial, split from top to bottom, and incapable of uniting themselves, let alone the country.

Jeremy Corbyn

No, I am making progress; I will not give way any more.

The Government are in denial about the majority view of this House, which I believe exists to rule out no deal and to get a workable deal that includes a customs union. That is why, tonight, Labour will back amendments that give this House the opportunity to recognise the reality that this Government have so far failed to recognise. This Government's shambolic handling of Brexit negotiations is fast becoming a crisis. It is worrying to businesses and it is worrying to people in work who are concerned about their futures. Everyone who is worried is worried because they have no leadership on this process from their Government. They have no leadership from a Government who have demonstrated that they have no ability to negotiate a good deal, no willingness to listen to Parliament—hence we are back here again despite the biggest ever defeat in parliamentary history—and, crucially, no acceptance that they must change course. The Government have spent

most of the past two years arguing among themselves rather than negotiating with the European Union. And they are still arguing among themselves and failing to come up with a workable solution. Tonight, I hope that this House does its job and leads where this Government have failed.

15:13:00

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con)

None of us taking part in this debate is in any doubt that we are actually discussing an almost unique political crisis—one of a kind that has not happened for very many years. The crisis takes two forms: one is that we are trying to break a political deadlock over exactly what changes we will make to the great bulk of our political, security, intelligence, crime-fighting, trade and investment, and environmental relationships with the rest of the world, having turned away from the ones that we have put together over the past 47 years; the second is that we are also facing a constitutional crisis over the credibility of Government and Parliament in their ability to resolve these matters. I rather agree with what the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) said. I enjoy as much as any veteran parliamentarian the rowdiness of the House of Commons; it is a way of testing the arguments. However, we should also be aware that, at the moment, the public are looking on our political system with something rather near to contempt, as it seems to them that neither the Government nor the political parties, parliamentarians and politicians in general seem able to resolve a question that was first raised by a referendum. Referendums are designed by those who support them to bypass parliamentary decision making, parliamentary majorities and political parties deciding things. We really do need to settle down, and, perhaps if the Government get their way, we can do that in the next few weeks. We have fewer than 60 days to decide how we will come to conclusions about the way forward.

I want to concentrate on just a few issues. I have put forward most of my views on these amendments in the many debates that we have had already, and many other people want to speak. I suspect that a high proportion of this House can guess which way I will vote on the amendments that Mr Speaker has chosen. Probably far too many of them have had to listen to my arguments. To take some encouragement from this debate—

Frank Field

Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr Clarke

I will in a second.

I wish to take up this question of the relationship between Parliament and Government, because I took some encouragement from my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, who did seem to accept that the Government should give opportunities to the House to debate things that each Member regards as key matters of policy. Under our constitution, the Government have to pay regard to the views expressed by this House.

Frank Field

I am very grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way. He and I tabled an amendment that was not called. It was to give this House the chance to vote on the various options. The Prime Minister, when she was speaking, talked of taking other amendments away and working on them with the hope of bringing them back to act upon. Might I, through this intervention, ask him to push on his own side that she does precisely that with our amendment?

Mr Clarke

Well, unless I take too long, I hope to touch on the arguments behind the right hon. Gentleman's excellent amendment, because that is one of the things that we should do in one way or another over the next few weeks.

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

Mr Clarke

Let me just deal with this question and then I will give way to the hon. Gentleman if his point is relevant.

The question is, what is the role of this House vis-à-vis the Government and what are our procedures? I must admit that, in the past month or two, I have listened to what I, as a fairly experienced Member here now, have regarded as the most extraordinary nonsense about sweeping away centuries of tradition and distorting our procedures because people have objected to the Speaker selecting amendments where they think they might not be on the winning side. There is a rather fundamental, underlying problem here. This Government did not start this, but Brexit brought it to its head. I think that it started with the Blair Government, because Tony Blair, with the greatest respect, never could quite understand why he had to submit to Parliament so often. He started timetabling all our business and so on, but that is now water under the bridge. I say with respect that, mistakenly, this Government began by saying that they were going to invoke the royal prerogative, and, as it was a treaty, they felt that Parliament would not be involved in invoking article 50 or any of the consequences because the monarch would act solely on the advice of her Prime Minister, trying to take us back several hundred years. That was swept away. Then we had to have defeats inflicted on the Government last summer in order to get a meaningful vote on the outcome of any negotiations. This has gone on all the way through the process. Today's debate and the votes that we are having tonight are only taking place because the Government actually resisted the whole idea of coming back here with any alternative to the deal that they were telling us was done and fixed and the only way of going forward. That has worried me all the way through.

Now, I did take the Prime Minister today to be taking a totally different approach, and I hope that she will confirm that. It does now seem that, whatever course we decide on today, things are going to come back to this House. No deal of any kind is going to be ratified until we have had a vote in this House, approving whatever we are presented with. One problem is that we have not yet produced a consensus or a majority for any option, but if this House expresses a clear wish about the nature of the deal that it wants to see negotiated, the Government will consider—indeed, I believe that under our constitution, they are bound to follow—the wishes of the House of Commons, because British Governments have never been able to pursue these matters without the consent and support of a majority of the House of Commons.

Angus Brendan MacNeil

The right hon. and learned Gentleman said that the House must test the various options. Will he “join the (q)”, as it were? Amendment (q) aims to revoke article 50. Is that one of the ideas that he thinks should be tested in this House—even for nothing other than that the people of Scotland would at least know the folly of sticking with Westminster, which is taking them out of Europe against their will?

Mr Clarke

I do not wish to revoke article 50 for the same reasons as the hon. Gentleman, although I do share some of his views. If I was trying to exercise unfettered autocratic power in the government of the country, I would of course still believe that the best interests of the United Kingdom lie in

remaining a member of the European Union. I do not share enthusiasm, however, for what the hon. Gentleman wants. After the pleasure of the first referendum and all that it has caused, he now thinks that we will automatically resolve things by having a second referendum, which could be even more chaotic in its effects than that the one we have had.

As I have said, the Government of the day have got to give this House a far bigger role, which therefore means a much bigger responsibility on this House to create the intraparty, cross-party majority that is the only majority of any kind that might be available here for any sensible way forward.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con)
Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Clarke
Let me just finish my point. I will give way in a minute.

I heard all the stuff when the Clerks were invoked—the advice of the Clerks to the Government to resist this approach. Of course it is true that the law can only be changed by legislation. That is a perfectly straightforward legal point. But in our constitution, in my opinion, the Government are accountable politically to the non-legislative votes of Parliament. It is utterly absurd to say that Opposition Supply days and amendments to motions of the kind we are addressing today are just the resolutions of a debating society that have no effect upon the conduct of daily government. If we concede that point in the middle of this shambles of Brexit, with all the other things we have to resolve, we will have done great harm to future generations because it is difficult to see how the concept of parliamentary sovereignty will survive such an extraordinary definition.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con)
May I humbly suggest that the Prime Minister is actually following the will of Parliament, because she is remembering that, two years ago, two thirds of MPs in this Parliament voted to trigger article 50, which leads to the unconditional leaving of the European Union on 29 March? That was the instruction that she was given by Parliament that she is trying to deliver, and our duty is to assist her.

Mr Clarke
With the greatest respect to my right hon. Friend, I think that my approach throughout the last two years has demonstrated that I am prepared to be pragmatic in response to these things. I did not regard myself as bound by a referendum. In the British constitution, referendums are advisory—they are described as such in official pronouncements—but politically most Members of this House bound themselves to obeying the result. That was brought home to me in a parliamentary way, consistent with what I have just been saying, by the massive majority of votes cast for invoking article 50. I opposed the invocation of article 50, but since that time I accept—I have to accept—that this House has willed that we are leaving the European Union.

With respect to my right hon. Friend, I do not concur that we agreed to leave unconditionally, whatever the circumstances, at a then arbitrary date two years ahead. We then wasted at least the first 18 months of the time, because nobody here had really thought through in any detailed way exactly what we were now going to seek as an alternative to our membership of the European Union, to safeguard our political and economic relationships with the world in the future. And we still have not decided that. It looks as though I am going to be remarkably brief by my own standards, but that is probably only in contrast with the frequently interrupted Front-Bench speeches, to which I have mercifully been only mildly, and perfectly pleasantly, exposed.

Where does this leave me, given that I believe I have a duty to make my mind up on the votes that we are going to have today? I am one of those who voted for withdrawal on the withdrawal agreement. That was the first time in my life that I have ever cast any kind of vote contemplating Britain leaving the European project and the European Union. I thought that the agreement was perfectly harmless and perfectly obvious, and could have been negotiated years before, with citizenship rights, legally owed debts that we are obviously going to honour and an arrangement that protected the Irish border—the treaty commitment to a permanently open border.

The independent hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) is the only Irish Member we have who agrees with the majority of the Irish population, who would prefer to remain. Like me, I think that she accepts the reality, but I know that she thinks the backstop is an important defence of the interests of Ireland with an open border. It is quite absurd to reopen that question. I am glad to say that the Prime Minister is still very firmly committed to a permanent open border, and I congratulate her on that. She is not going to break our solemn treaty commitments and set back our relationship with the Republic of Ireland for another generation. I realise that the Prime Minister has been driven to this by the attitudes of quite a number of Government Members, but I personally cannot see what the vague alternative to a perfectly harmless backstop that we are now going to explore is; nor do I see what the outcome is going to be. Our partners—or previous partners—in the European Union cannot understand quite what we are arguing for either, so we move from having a deal to not having a deal.

Let me just say what I will vote for. I am not going to go through it amendment by amendment, because Members are waiting to move those amendments. I shall vote for anything that avoids leaving with no deal on 29 March. It is perfectly obvious that we are in a state of such chaos that we are not remotely going to answer these questions in the 60-odd—fewer than 60—days before then. We need more time. The Prime Minister says that there are only two alternatives: the deal we have got, which she is now wanting to alter and go back and reopen; or no deal on 29 March. That is not true. A further option—and my guess is that the other members of the European Union would be only too ready to hear it opened up as a possibility—is that we extend article 50 to give us time to actually reach some consensus. I think that it would create quite some time, and there are problems over the European Parliament and so on. I have always said that we can revoke it, while making it clear to the angry majority in the House of Commons that they can invoke it again, with their majorities, once we are in a position to settle these outstanding issues, which, as we sit here at the moment, we are nowhere near to resolving, and we are right at the end of the timetable. The alternative to no deal is to stay in the Union for as long as it takes to get near to a deal that we are likely all to be able to agree on and that the majority of us think is in the national interest.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con)

I think that my right hon. and learned Friend will therefore be joining me in the Lobby in support of what is known as the Cooper amendment. Does he agree that in changing Standing Orders, the House of Commons, if it has a majority to do so, is doing something that the House of Commons has done since Standing Orders were created, and did before the Government took control of the Order Paper in 1906?

Mr Clarke

Absolutely. We will not debate the constitutional history, but people are trying to invoke the strictest interpretation of Standing Orders going back to attempts in the late 19th century to stop the Irish nationalists filibustering, which brought the whole thing grinding to a halt. Now we are saying that as this Parliament has the temerity to have a range of views, some of which are not acceptable

to the Government, Standing Orders should be invoked against us to discipline us. Anyway, I will not go back to that, but I agree with my right hon. Friend.

The other thing that I shall vote for is another thing that supports the Prime Minister's stated ambition for the long-term future of the country: open borders and free trade between ourselves and our markets in the EU, as demanded by our business leaders, our trade union leaders, and, I think, most people who have the economic wellbeing of future generations at heart. I think the only known way in the world in which we can do that is to stay in a customs union, and also to have sufficient regulatory alignment to eliminate the need for border barriers. I do not mind if some of my right hon. and hon. Friends prefer to call the customs union a "customs arrangement" or if they care to call the single market "regulatory alignment". I do not feel any great distress at their use of gentler language to describe these things. Nevertheless, something very near to that is required to deliver our economic and political ambitions.

It is also the obvious and only way to protect the permanent open border in Ireland. We do not need to invent this ridiculous Irish backstop if the whole United Kingdom is going into a situation where it has an open border with the whole of the European Union in any event. The Irish backstop was only invented to appease those people who envisaged the rest of the British Isles suddenly deciding to leave with no deal before we had finished the negotiations in Europe. Well, let us forget that. Let us make it our aim—it will not be easy but it is perfectly possible—to negotiate, probably successfully, with the other 27 an open trading economic and investment relationship through the single market and the customs union.

Lady Hermon

I am very grateful to the Father of the House for allowing me to intervene. I just want to say ever so gently that in his very nice tribute to the hon. Member for North Down, I think he might have accidentally referred to the lady as an Irish Member of this House. No, I am very much a British Member of this House. However, he is absolutely right that I feel passionate about protecting the Belfast agreement—the Good Friday agreement—and the peace that it has delivered in the past 20 years across Northern Ireland and across the whole of the United Kingdom. The backstop was there to protect that peace, and I am very sorry that the Prime Minister has moved away from that today.

Mr Clarke

I apologise to the hon. Lady, but I must explain to her that I refer to her and her colleagues as Irish Members of Parliament in the same way that I would refer to myself as an English Member of Parliament, or perhaps to a colleague as a Welsh or Scottish Member of Parliament. [Hon. Members: "Northern Irish."] She is Northern Irish. I can assure her that not only do I agree entirely with the views she just expressed about what we are seeking here, but I am as keen a Unionist as she is, and I do not wish to see the break-up of the present United Kingdom. I think that she and I are in total agreement.

The other thing I would support, which arises in the context of one of the amendments we are talking about, is that the Government obviously should no longer resist this House having indicative votes. It is absurd that we have been trying to get a debate and a vote on some of the more obvious things for months now, and as time goes on, the Government are still trying to make it difficult to have a vote on them. When we have the votes, no doubt the Government and the Opposition will start imposing three-line Whips on everybody to take a narrow focus, trying to take us all back towards the failed withdrawal agreement or the rather confused Labour party policy and ensuring that we shoot down every other sensible proposition. There are quite a lot of sensible propositions flying around the House that are superior to the policy of the Government so far and certainly superior to the policy of the Leader of the Opposition. Indicative votes enable us in the time

available—to shorten delay further—to give an expression of will and an instruction to the Government about the nature of the long-term arrangements that we want.

To go back to where I started, the circumstances at the moment mean that we have to strive to restore confidence in our political system, our political institutions and, above all, this House of Commons and ensure that an outcome of that kind emerges, because if this shambles goes on much longer, I hate to think where populism and extremism will take us next in British democracy.

15:36:00

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

As always, it is a pleasure to follow the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). I look forward to spending a considerable time with him in the Lobby this evening as we vote for amendments that offer hope to the people of all these islands.

I want to impress upon the Prime Minister the decision of the people of Scotland in the 2016 referendum and what she must now do to respect their wishes. During the Scottish independence referendum campaign in 2014, the Scottish Tory leader Ruth Davidson promised that voting no meant that Scotland would remain in the EU. Scotland did not vote for a Tory Brexit, but we are being dragged out of the European Union by Westminster against our will. The Prime Minister talks about this being a family of nations and says that Scotland's voice will be respected. Where is the respect for the views and wishes of the people of Scotland, who have demonstrably said that they wish to remain EU citizens?

Angus Brendan MacNeil

Is it not the reality that polling in Scotland shows that the European Union remains more popular with the Scottish people than the United Kingdom? That should be heard loud and clear in this place—the European Union is more popular with Scots than the United Kingdom.

Ian Blackford

That is correct, and it is little surprise, because the European institutions show respect to the people of Scotland, which this Government do not.

The Prime Minister promised that a no vote would see Scotland's future as an equal partner, but we now see Westminster taking powers off the Scottish Parliament against the wishes of the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish people. [Interruption.] I should not do this, but I will. I hear from a sedentary position the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) saying, "What powers?" Obviously he has forgotten that he voted for the withdrawal Act, which interfered with the powers of the Scottish Parliament laid down in the Scotland Act—powers over fishing, powers over the environment and powers over agriculture. The Tories sat back and allowed the Scottish Parliament to be emasculated. The 13 Scottish Tories acted against the interests of the people of Scotland, as they have done time and again.

The Westminster campaign against Scottish independence said that high street banks were making plans to leave Scotland, yet now, because of this Government's Brexit, Standard Life Aberdeen is setting up a hub in Dublin, and Lloyds Bank is looking at a Berlin base.

Even last week during Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister tried to tell me to drop the SNP policy of independence, yet in June 2017 the leader of the Scottish Tories, Ruth Davidson, said:

“Let me be clear: nobody, not me, not anyone, is expecting the SNP to give up on independence. That’s what it believes in & it’s a perfectly honourable position to take.”

It is a perfectly honourable position to take.

Let me be very clear: Scotland must no longer be left at the mercy of events. Whatever happens here, the SNP will not be dropping its policy of independence. Whatever turmoil and hardship this Tory Government try to drag our nation through, Scotland will and must have the right to determine its own future and to choose to be an independent nation within the European Union. I can see Members shaking their heads. They are shaking their heads because they are running scared. Like the Prime Minister, they fear they would lose an independence referendum. The Scottish people are sick and tired of being told what the Prime Minister wants them to do. Scotland’s needs are much more important than what the Prime Minister wants. Scotland needs the power to take its own decisions. That is the only way we can stop the Tories driving us off the cliff edge and into disaster.

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

The right hon. Gentleman made the point that the Scottish people should have what the Scottish people want. Did the Scottish people not indicate their wish to remain part of the United Kingdom?

Ian Blackford

I can only assume that the hon. Lady was not listening to what I said, because the fundamental fact is that we were promised that we would stay in the European Union.

What the Tories find very difficult to accept is that when the Scottish National party went to the people of Scotland, we asked in our manifesto for the right to go back to the people of Scotland if there was a material change of circumstances, and that is exactly the position we are in today. There is a majority in the Scottish Parliament for a referendum on Scottish independence, yet what we hear from the Conservatives is, “Now is not the time”, disrespecting the mandate that the people of Scotland gave to their elected parliamentarians. I will say this to the Conservative Benches: if our First Minister calls for a section 30 authority, based on democracy, then this House must respect the will of the Scottish people through their elected parliamentarians.

That is the only way to stop the punitive cuts from universal credit and amend the hostile environment that sends talented workers away from our shores. The vote on the immigration Bill is just the latest indication of Westminster voting against Scotland’s national interest. We embrace free movement of people. We welcome those who choose to make a future for themselves in Scotland. We thank those who wish to add to our cultural diversity. This place wants to slam the door shut, pull up the drawbridge and retreat into isolation.

We watch the official Opposition go through trials and tribulations about whether they should oppose a narrow-minded immigration policy from this Government. Labour has lost its moral compass. Then we have the Scots Tory MPs meekly going through the Lobbies. Theresa’s Lobby fodder are supporting legislation that will damage Scottish industries and our public services, and damage Scotland’s ability to attract labour and to grow our economy. The Scottish Tories are acting against our national interest, and Labour is stuck on the sidelines.

A majority of MSPs and Scottish MPs returned at the last two elections support holding an independence referendum in the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Scotland will not be ignored. The UK Government have ignored the views of the people of Scotland. Our Parliament—our Scottish Parliament—has already overwhelmingly rejected the Prime Minister’s deal. Today,

SNP MPs will vote in support of that mandate from Scotland's Parliament, and we will continue to vote down the blindfold Brexit deal that will drive our economy off the cliff edge.

There are just 59 days to go until Brexit day, and the deal on the table is done; it has been dead in the water for months, yet the Prime Minister is still seeking to run down the clock and push that deal through this House. That is incredibly reckless and risky. How can she be allowed to behave in such a manner? She has no hope of controlling this House; she cannot even control her disunited party. If anyone is still in any doubt about it, we are in this mess today because Conservative Members gambled our economic future over a decade-long internal feud in the Tory party. They should all hang their head in shame. Quite simply, that party is not fit to govern, because it has a track record of putting its fractured party interests before the national interest—not what the Prime Minister calls the national interest, but the interest of all the nations that make up the UK.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con)

On the Scottish national interest, I totally respect the Scottish National party's position: it has always campaigned for independence, because that is what the SNP does. However, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that in the 2017 general election, the majority—56%—of voters in Scotland voted for parties that were committed to delivering on Brexit? The percentage of the vote for parties against Brexit actually reduced. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker

Order. That is extraordinary behaviour from the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who is an illustrious doctor. She is ranting from a sedentary position; I cannot believe that she rants in that way in the middle of her surgeries. It is unbecoming of somebody of her status and high esteem in the House of Commons.

Ian Blackford

Of course, we come to this place under the rules that have been laid down, and under the rules of elections in this country, the SNP won 35 of 59 Scottish seats at Westminster. That is a majority for the Scottish National party in this Parliament. The Conservatives can only dream of having a majority. The Prime Minister went to the country on the basis that she would come back with an overwhelming majority; she came back with a bloody nose and a minority Administration who rely on the votes of the Democratic Unionist party, having handed over vast sums of money to keep themselves in any kind of power.

Today, as the Prime Minister faces a vote on her motion, the threat of resignations overshadow the debate. We know that senior Ministers have refused to rule out resigning if no deal is not taken off the table. Politicians play a slow game, and time is running out for businesses. The Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington) said that the Prime Minister's attempt to put pressure on moderate MPs to back her deal in order to avoid a disorderly Brexit was "a disaster for business".

The chief executive of Airbus, Tom Enders, said the business

"could be forced to redirect future investments"

in the event of no deal. The chief executive of Siemens, Jürgen Maier, said:

"The thing all of us won't be able to manage is a no-deal"

and now the British Retail Consortium warns of food shortages and empty shelves.

Just dwell on this: Sainsbury's, Asda, Marks and Spencer, the Co-op, Waitrose and Costcutter all warn of not having sufficient supplies, and of shelves lying empty. We are used to seeing images of empty shelves in war-torn or failing states, but there is a real threat of empty shelves in the United Kingdom in less than two months. Still the Prime Minister refuses to take no deal off the table. I point the finger of blame at the Prime Minister and her Government. The primary responsibility of any Government is to protect their citizens. We have a massive failure of leadership. If there are shortages of food and medicine, that will be a response to the failures of this Government. There is genuine, heartfelt fear and alarm from some of our biggest businesses.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con)

What is the right hon. Gentleman's objection to enabling the Prime Minister to probe the EU on what it is prepared to give way on, in order to help deliver the deal that he would like? What is so objectionable in new amendment (n)? Can he give any reason for not supporting it?

Ian Blackford

This is a complete fantasy. All of us play with the Good Friday agreement at our peril. The peace in Ireland has been hard won. The European Union has reached agreement with the UK on the Prime Minister's draft deal on the basis of making sure that we enshrine the Good Friday agreement. None of us should be playing with fire and seeking to unwind the Good Friday agreement. That is the effect of what would happen. It is the height of irresponsibility to go down that road. [Interruption.] I am going to come on to the backstop in more detail later.

The Prime Minister could make it clear today that she will bring measures before Parliament to rule out no deal. Prime Minister, it is in all our national interests to remove the threat of supply shortages that is a threat to food safety—remove it today.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP)

Is it not also a fact that in addition to the companies who issued those warnings, the Road Haulage Association has been saying for over a year that it is madness to consider a no-deal situation? What will happen is that those people at the furthest reaches of the supply chain—my constituents and my right hon. Friend's constituents—will be those worst affected by the no-deal scenario that the Government are hanging over the heads of this Parliament and the people of all the nations of the UK.

Ian Blackford

My hon. Friend is quite correct. We have integrated supply chains on the basis of the single market, which has been in place since the 1990s. There are very real threats to food supply on the basis of no deal. It is the height of irresponsibility for the Government not to rule it out.

Caroline Lucas

I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way, because he is making a really powerful case about what no deal could really look like. He says there could be food shortages and, crucially, that food prices could go up. Does he share my anger at the voices behind me that he perhaps did not hear? When he was talking about food prices going up and the fact that there could be food shortages, Members behind me were saying, "Well, let them go to the chippy instead." Does he share my anger about the way in which our constituencies would be affected by no deal?

Ian Blackford

I am sorry to hear that that remark was made. This is a really important debate. There is a responsibility on each and every one of us to take these issues seriously. [Interruption.] I want to make some progress and I will take some interventions later.

The Prime Minister will do nothing. She remains in office but not in power, transfixed like a rabbit caught in the headlights. There is a failure to deliver leadership. To use a food analogy, the Prime Minister is past her sell-by date. Focusing on backing MPs into a corner with the only options on the table her deal or no deal is ridiculous. I urge Members to resist the pressure. We cannot allow the UK Government to run down the clock and bully MPs into backing this terrible deal. Pretending there is a binary choice between her woeful deal and a catastrophic no deal is completely reckless. It is false. It is not the case and Members must have the courage to stand up against it. We have the power in this place to send this shambolic deal packing. We have the power to amend the deal to protect all our citizens. We have the power to end this charade. Members on all Benches: have courage, have conviction and have some integrity. Do not send our economy off the cliff-edge with this deal or with no deal.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con)

I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. He has made some very powerful points, quoting the voices of business saying that there should not be no deal. I also believe there should not be no deal; I believe there should be a deal. Does he also accept that those same voices of business, giving evidence to Select Committees, have said, for the very reasons he is giving, that there should not be no deal and that we should support the Prime Minister's deal with the European Union because it provides for an orderly and smooth Brexit?

Ian Blackford

The businesses I speak to recognise the benefits of the single market and the customs union. There is no Brexit option that will leave us better off than the status quo. I will come on to the economic arguments about that. Our job is to protect the economic interests of our citizens, but Brexit will lead to job losses throughout the United Kingdom. We have already seen the news about the European Medicines Agency and the European Banking Authority—they have gone—and about Jaguar Land Rover and others. It is the height of irresponsibility for politicians, on the basis of ideology, to threaten the economic circumstances of their citizens, but that is what is happening. The Tory party's myopic view of Brexit is leading these nations out of the European Union.

Anna Soubry

May I gently say to the right hon. Gentleman that we will soon have only three hours of debate left? There are seven amendments, and many Back Benchers—I am not one of them—wish to speak. I look forward to joining him in the Lobbies this evening on many of these amendments. Many of us are grateful for his support.

Ian Blackford

I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her intervention, but it is the Prime Minister who has set the timeline for this debate. I am speaking as the leader of the third party, as I am entitled to do. Given that that issue has been raised, I ask this question: where are the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition?

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP)

Going back to the intervention of the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), is it not insane to say that agreeing to the Prime Minister's deal will lead to an orderly Brexit? All it would do is put stuff into a transition period, during which time we would not know what is happening. Even the

Prime Minister is now arguing that she needs to go back and change the backstop. There is no orderly Brexit, and there is no deal to agree.

Ian Blackford

The Government like to talk about an implementation period, but what are they implementing? The only thing they have come forward with is a deal to leave the European Union. The relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union is to be left to the future, and there is no knowing how long that will take. According to the papers in front of us, it will supposedly happen within a two-year period, but many believe that it could take five years or perhaps even longer. There is no certainty with what the Government are bringing forward.

We have still not seen any economic assessment of the Government's deal. Either the Prime Minister has not instructed her Government to conduct one, or they will not publish it due to the reality of the hardship that her deal will bring. We are being asked again to vote for a blindfold Brexit and to sleepwalk into the future without facts and analysis from the Government about what the deal means for our economy. It is an insult to this House and each and every Member in it.

I wish to ask the Prime Minister a question—I hope she reads this in Hansard, as she is not here. Will she publish the details of the impact of her deal on the economy, and contrast it with the status quo? The Government are refusing to end the shroud of secrecy and publish an economic analysis, but let me remind the House of the facts. Analysis by Scottish Government officials found that by 2030, under a free trade agreement, GDP would be £9 billion lower than it would have been if we had stayed in the EU—equivalent to £1,600 per person in Scotland. The Bank of England has warned that crashing out of the EU without a deal would be worse than the 2008 financial crisis, with house prices plummeting by as much as 30% and the Bank of England rate being hiked to 4%. Brexit uncertainty is already damaging our economy to the tune of £600 per household per year. Jobs and investment are at risk, and our economy is set to be weaker and smaller. How can any Member of this House countenance that?

We were elected to protect our citizens, not punish them, but Brexit will inflict undue pain across all parts of the United Kingdom. With this deal or no deal our constituents are set to suffer, and we cannot allow that to happen. Some Brexiteers argue that we will be okay without the internal markets of the EU. They are in cloud cuckoo land, harking back to the past. I say this to them: it is over.

Let us look at the facts. The UK's trade with County Cork is worth almost as much as its entire trade with South Africa. Trade with Ireland is worth more to the UK than trade with India, Japan, New Zealand and Australia put together. As "Scotland's Place in Europe" demonstrated, even if the UK signs agreements with the 10 biggest non-EEA single country trading partners, including the USA, China and Canada—a process that would take many years—that would cover only 37% of Scotland's current exports. In contrast, 43% currently go to the European Union. The idea that we will be better off outside the European Union is a fallacy.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con)

If trade volumes are the principal determinant of policy in this area, would the right hon. Gentleman not agree that, given that 61% of Scotland's exports go to the rest of the UK and only 17% to the EU, the most important union for Scotland is the United Kingdom?

Ian Blackford

I find that remarkable. There we have a threat to the people of Scotland from a Conservative Member. I thought we believed in free trade. We are not talking about barriers to trade with the

island of Ireland, so why on earth would there be barriers to trade with Scotland? It is about time the Conservatives stopped threatening the people of Scotland, because that is exactly what they are doing.

It is demoralising to sit here today listening to the merry-go-round of Tory infighting and Labour fence-sitting. There is no leadership from these two parties. I genuinely feel for those across the UK who voted for the Tories and Labour and have been so badly let down. Now their cowardice threatens us all: our livelihoods, yes, but also our culture and communities and the type of society we could be. Our cultural ties with Europe run deep throughout Scotland. The auld alliance is perhaps the best known of Scotland's ancient ties. France and Scotland enjoy deep cultural ties and have agreed a mutual cultural statement of intent, which the Scottish Government signed in 2013. We share a rich Celtic history of story-telling and traditional music and a great love of piping.

Such was the wealth of intellectual exchange between Scotland and Europe that in Kirkwall's library in the 1680s there were books from Amsterdam, Kraków, Brussels Rostock, Paris, Leipzig and dozens of other places. Our relationship with Germany dates back to 1297, when William Wallace wrote to the martyrs of Lübeck and Hamburg declaring Scotland open for business. In case Members are unaware, immigration was around long before the EU and will be around long after. It is, after all, a global phenomenon.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con)

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On a point of clarification, the right hon. Gentleman just suggested there was a relationship with Germany going back to the 1200s, but Germany did not exist in the 1200s.

Mr Speaker

I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his historical exegesis, from which the leader of the Scottish National party can choose to think he can either benefit or not benefit. It is a matter for him, not the Chair.

Ian Blackford

I think I will treat it with the contempt it deserves, Mr Speaker.

By 1914, Scotland had nearly 25,000 European residents, mostly from southern and eastern Europe. Between 1891 and 1901, 25% of the immigrants came from Italy. The majority came mainly from Russia and Poland and settled mostly in the west of Scotland, and they were welcomed, just as migrants today are welcomed. Almost 50% of male immigrants worked in coal mining and about 12% in tailoring, while most of the Italian migrants became more involved with restaurants and retail.

We have so much to lose from Brexit and nothing to gain. I plead with Members to change course. If they do, history will remember their act of courage. Today, Members have an opportunity to preserve our opportunities with Europe—our cultural links, our shared values, our economic ties and our solidarity in coming together to find a way forward.

Voting for the SNP amendment will respect the votes of the people of Scotland in 2016. They must not and will not be dragged out of the EU against their will. Scotland's voice has been ignored for too long. The SNP will continue to press for the best possible outcome for the people of Scotland, and if our voice is not respected—if Scotland is continuously silenced and sidelined by this Tory Government—this place will not be forgiven.

The days of Westminster having a veto over Scotland's future are over. Only as an independent country can Scotland thrive; and friends, we will thrive. The discussions today about ditching the backstop are just internal Tory matters. They can fight and squabble, but the EU is united and clear. It will not accept any changes to the backstop in the withdrawal agreement.

Angus Brendan MacNeil

One of the things that I think the Prime Minister did not quite convey or understand, or forgot, is that the backstop is a compromise. It is a compromise based on the fantasies of the technologies that she has promised will come. If she is right and those fantasies are true, she does not need to worry about the backstop. She would not need to worry if the technology that is being used on the Swiss border were available. I suggest that the Europeans have used a backstop because they know that the fantasies are exactly that.

Ian Blackford
rose—

Mr Speaker

Order. I am cautiously optimistic that the right hon. Gentleman is approaching his brief peroration. [Interruption.]

Ian Blackford

If Members want to hear more, I am happy to carry on.

My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. I would say to the Prime Minister that there are two ways in which we could fix the backstop. The first is staying in the European Union, but the second is staying in the single market and the customs union. That is the fundamental point: that is the only way in which it is possible to remove any need for the backstop from the agreement. The Taoiseach is clear about the fact that the backstop is not up for grabs, so why do Members not get real? Why does the Prime Minister not stop fudging it?

The Prime Minister needs to own up to her own delayed mess, extend article 50, and do it today. That is the only way in which to give this place time to find a solution.

Mr Speaker

Order. With immediate effect, a 10-minute limit will now apply to Back-Bench speeches, but I do not anticipate that it will last very long.

16:06:00

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con)
I will accept your guidance, Mr Speaker.

It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) for plenty of reasons, but specifically because he happens to have what I think is possibly the most beautiful constituency in the country—and my heart is there because both my parents are buried there, as are many of my ancestors. There are some links between us, beyond a wee drop now and then.

In the limited time available to me, I want to respond to what was said by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. She gave us a challenge—quite rightly, I think—at the beginning of what was, I must say, an excellent speech. She said that we had spent a lot of time telling everyone what we

were against, and that now we must say what we were in favour of. In accepting that challenge, I shall say what I am against, and then come on to what I am in favour of. I shall do that quickly, I hope.

I shall oppose the amendment tabled by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve). He remains a friend, an honourable friend, and he is much admired: he was, I thought, an excellent Attorney General. However, I disagree with him on this specific issue. I do not think—this is my view, and we will have different feelings about it—that the House needs another process, or mechanism, to allow it to decide what it is in favour of or against. I think that all multiple motions of this kind end up with a place like this going nine ways from Sunday, and we do not end up with any kind of agreement. I think that the amendment process is a way of deciding what we are in favour of. My right hon. and learned Friend will push his amendment tonight, and I think we will then get an idea of whether the House really does think that.

Let me comment in the same light, but for a different reason, on the amendment tabled by the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) proposing a delay. Like my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, I do not think that, of all the things we need right now, we need to book a delay regardless of what we are actually delaying for. I am conscious of the way in which the Commission has responded to the idea of a delay in recent days. Its response has been, “We do not want you to delay, because we do not want you to crash into all our procedures that we have now allowed. For instance, you are not taking part in the European elections—we do not want those to be disrupted—and we do not know what it is that you want to delay for.”

The amendment contains no appendage, as it were, telling us what the delay might actually be about. I can understand someone saying, “We are near the end of an agreement, but we have run out of time a bit”, but that is different from simply crying out for a delay. I think that, ultimately, it comes down to the fact that, as many on the right hon. Lady’s own side have said, it will then become a reality that we are opposing the delivery of Brexit. Those who vote for the amendment tonight will have to face that challenge: perhaps the delay is really all about stopping Brexit. However, I will leave the right hon. Lady to deal with that herself. I admire her enormously, as I would, but on this issue, I disagree with her completely.

As for the amendment tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), again, I just do not think that this one works. The issue of a delay—even expressed as it is in the terms of a motion—brings me back to where I was earlier. I hope that my right hon. Friend will forgive me, but I will not support her tonight. I shall go with the Prime Minister on this.

I want to make two further points and then a comment about what I think I must support tonight. I voted against the agreement; I did so because I felt it was too full of problems and issues that would not be settled and would give a lack of clarity, and so I expressed my view. I have not voted against the Government for well over 20 years, and I did not particularly enjoy doing it, but I did so because I felt that we needed to rethink this and go back and make some changes. So I am pleased tonight that the Prime Minister has come back.

I challenge those who say that the only thing available is the backstop as it is. That is not altogether true; it depends what question is being asked. An open border, which is the key question that Ireland wanted, can be settled by a much simpler backstop. I am in favour of a backstop; I think it is fair for Ireland and Northern Ireland to want guarantees that there will be an open border, so I am in favour of an open border and of that guarantee. I am just not in favour of the complexity and nature of the demands that left Northern Ireland separated in terms from this Union that we are in favour of keeping Northern Ireland in. That led to serious and significant problems. I believe that the protocol

that we have, and that I have been to see the negotiating team in Brussels over, is the key to the way we go forward, and I believe its response to us was positive. I therefore think it would be good to take that process back to Brussels.

This brings me to what has emerged overnight, which I have been involved with myself, although not absolutely in the frontline. It is an agreement between those of us who take different views about Brexit in my party. I am thinking in particular of my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan). I say absolutely genuinely to my colleagues that we might be divided about these issues, but we must now strive to find some kind of compromise. I say that as if it is somehow a discovery, but it is not really; I do genuinely think we have the prospect of moving towards that. So however we vote tonight, I hope we will, bit by bit, get behind the process that my colleagues have put forward with those of other colleagues who have taken a very different view about Brexit. I think this is wholly feasible, and I am in full support of this, given the nature of it. I therefore recommend that all of us, despite how we end up voting tonight, recognise that in delivering leaving the European Union in line with the vote that took place in the referendum, this offers a real opportunity not just for Members on my side of the House but for Members opposite who believe that it is right to deliver Brexit to get behind it.

So now I come to what I am in favour of, which started with the issue of this internal agreement here. We need what the Prime Minister described today: we need to express that view. The Prime Minister was clear on a number of points that I particularly wanted to hear. I wanted to hear whether she was determined to ensure that, where necessary, we looked for legally binding change and that change therefore would change the complexion of the agreement that she had, and she said that today. I also thought she was very clear to the whole House that she is not going to assume that were a particular amendment to be passed it would mean we would all agree with whatever she came back with, and she has absolutely guaranteed that we will return with a chance to vote on that; I think that is clear.

I am also pleased that the Prime Minister answered my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) on the question about the extent of the legal powers and the adjudication of the Court of Justice in the Bill to follow; I thought it was strong of her to do that. Many would have avoided that question, as it is complex. Most of my hon. Friend's questions are quite complex, but she dealt with this one and dealt with it well.

Trying to keep to the time limit for speeches, I shall now simply say that on that basis, having voted against the agreement, I am now going to support the amendment of my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady). I shall support it tonight, not because I give a blank cheque and not because I think that therefore we will have solved the problem; I give this support to him, and therefore to what the Prime Minister has said is the Government's position, because I believe it is necessary for us now to send the Prime Minister back with a fair wind and a sense that this House has agreed that it wants her to go and renegotiate, and to take that change and that desire to deliver Brexit on time on 29 March with her over there to Brussels and achieve what I hope and believe, with strength and determination, she will be able to achieve in those negotiations. I wish her well, and I therefore will be voting tonight to support that amendment because I think it will be, for me, the greatest expression of my good will for a Prime Minister for whom, notwithstanding our disagreements sometimes, I have the greatest respect.

16:15:00

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

I rise to speak to amendment (b) and to support amendments (a), (g), (i) and (j). I also support amendment (h), but it has not been selected.

There are two months to go until the end of the article 50 time limit. The Prime Minister's deal was rejected comprehensively, fundamentally because I think all sides shared the view that it would weaken us abroad and in the negotiations ahead. It represents a blindfold Brexit that would weaken our negotiating hand. The Prime Minister is not instilling confidence that she has a plan to sort this out. I am really worried that the delay, the drift and the chasing of unicorns mean that we could end up with no deal by accident, even though that would hit jobs, our NHS and our border security, and put up food prices for the poorest families in the country.

I have called many times on the Government to support a customs union. Like many across this House, I want the Government to get a good Brexit deal that can pull people together and command support across the country, but I see no sign of that happening right now, and the clock is ticking. I am very worried by the warnings I have had from Haribo, Burberry, West Yorkshire police, GMB, manufacturers, trade unions and small businesses in my constituency about the consequences of us going over the edge of a cliff.

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

Does my right hon. Friend share my dismay at how Government Members have reacted to industry's concerns? Even Airbus, our largest aerospace company, has been subject to vitriol and hostility. Surely such responses defy all logic.

Yvette Cooper

My hon. Friend is right. We should be able to have a calm and measured debate, not all this shouting.

There have been different ways to do this at every stage. Two years ago, the whole House came together when both remain and leave voters voted to trigger article 50. I voted to do so and called at the time for a cross-party commission to oversee the options and negotiations. I called repeatedly on the Prime Minister to consult and to build consent. I went to see Ministers about it, and I went to see them again a few weeks ago to see if progress could be made and to urge them to reconsider the red lines. I made customs union-related proposals to Select Committees and, through the Select Committee on Home Affairs, suggested reforms to security co-operation and immigration as part of the Brexit process. Many of us have called repeatedly on the Government to simply pin down what they think the future of our country and of our relationship will be, instead of this blindfold Brexit in which nothing is resolved.

We have also called on the Government to build consensus. As I said after the general election, if we want a sustainable deal that does not unravel in a year or two and does not end up being undermined because there is so much disagreement, not just in this House but across the country, efforts must be made to build consensus on a deal. None of that has happened, and none of it is happening now either. Instead, we feel more divided and our country feels angrier and more confused than ever. People are sick of all the chaos, and the problem we face is that if we end up with no deal in just two months' time, that chaos and that division will get worse.

The Prime Minister's repeated delays mean that there is a real risk that the issue will not be resolved on time. There were 24 months to negotiate under article 50: five of them were used for a general election and another 16 were run down before the Government even came forward with the Chequers plan. It was left until 22 months had gone before we even had a vote in Parliament on the

Prime Minister's deal. There was no consultation on her red lines and Parliament was not given a vote on the mandate.

Those delays and failings are why we are here now. Unless the Prime Minister changes direction and her approach, I fear we will reach the brink. Saying the same things again and again will simply make it more important to have in place my amendment and my Bill, to ensure there is a safety net to prevent no deal on 29 March. I have always believed that the Prime Minister would not let that happen, and that she would flinch when it came to the crunch; that she is not the sort of person who would want to make other people suffer because of her delays and mistakes. However, when I look into her eyes now, I am worried that that has changed because she is trapped.

Every time the Prime Minister has had the chance to pull back and reach out, she has done the opposite. Every time she has had the chance to think about the country, she has instead turned to the party. Every time she has had the chance to build bridges, she has instead turned to the hardliners who simply want to set those bridges on fire. That is why I and a group of other, cross-party MPs and Committee Chairs have put forward amendment (b) and this Bill—to try to get the Prime Minister to think again and to make sure that Parliament has a safety net.

The amendment makes time to pass a Bill. It would give the Prime Minister and the Government until the end of February to sort things out. If they have not done so by then, MPs would get a binding vote at the end of February on whether to seek a bit more time and to extend article 50. We should bear it in mind that that would be just one month before the UK could crash out with no deal at all.

Neither the amendment nor the Bill block Brexit or revoke article 50—nor should they. They simply give Parliament the right to vote on whether to extend article 50 if time has run out.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con)

I have looked at the right hon. Lady's Bill in great detail. Will she confirm that clause 1(5) leaves open the prospect of an amendment being passed that would mean that article 50 could be revoked, not just extended?

Yvette Cooper

That is certainly not my intention with the Bill. It is about giving the House the opportunity to extend article 50 if we need more time, and to be able to decide the length of the extension. The whole point is that the motion put to the House would be amendable and those amendments would be binding.

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

My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. She talks of building consensus. I see consensus on both sides of the House for an extension of three months. If that were the will of the House, would it be possible for us to have an extension of three months only?

Yvette Cooper

It absolutely would be possible for the House to restrict any extension to three months. In fact, it would be possible to restrict it to three days, should Parliament choose to do so. We are not proposing that a specific time period should be decided now. The whole point is that it should be a decision at the end of February. My hon. Friend is right that that is what Parliament would be able to do.

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

Does my right hon. Friend agree with me, and would she confirm to the House again, that this is not about extending article 50, but about allowing Parliament to make the decision in the event that there is no deal and that the next step facing us is crashing out with no deal?

Yvette Cooper

My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We would be taking no decisions today, and we would be taking no decisions next Tuesday, when we would discuss the Bill. Instead, we would simply be saying that, at the end of February, with just one month to go before we get to the end of the article 50 process, it would be for Parliament to decide whether to seek an extension, and how long that should be for.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con)

Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Yvette Cooper

I am going to make some progress because I am worried about getting through everything in the time.

We should also be clear about why the amendment is needed. I know there are some on the Government Benches who say to the Prime Minister, first, that no deal might be desirable and, secondly, that it might be better than any kind of extension beyond 29 March. I strongly disagree. Other people will suffer if we in this Parliament, and this Government, allow no deal on 29 March.

Haribo in Pontefract is worried about the Government's contingency planning for a 75% to 90% reduction in the volume of EU trade through our ports. That will hit the ingredients that they bring in from abroad. That is bad for Starmix, obviously, but it is also bad for jobs and for investment. For Burberry, which makes Yorkshire macs in Castleford that it sells all over the world, that would mean an impact on supply chains and manufacturing production. Burberry contacted me to say that it respects the outcome of the referendum and remains hopeful of an orderly withdrawal and a workable transition, but it is deeply worried about no deal. Listen to Airbus, Ford or Jaguar Land Rover. We should be standing up for British manufacturing, the very backbone of our national economy. We should be helping our industry to compete with the best in the world, not holding it back or doing it in.

It is even worse for small businesses, because entrepreneurs who have mortgaged their house or used their life savings to set up, say, a florist that depends on bringing flowers in from the Netherlands cannot cope with delays in transit. Some of those small businesses could end up going under because of delays and decisions in this House and by this Government.

For our public services, it is just shocking. What have we come to when our NHS is having to spend millions of pounds on stockpiling medicines and on fridges and air freight, and when it is being told that it needs to call in the Navy? That money should be going into patient care.

I am most worried of all that tariffs on food—the WTO tariffs that some people are so blasé about—will hit the poorest families hardest. Some 14 million of our fellow citizens, including 4.5 million children, are already living in poverty. In Airedale in my constituency, local councillors have set up a holiday lunch club. Children are going hungry when they do not have a free school meal, because their parents cannot afford their food bills. Are the Government really going to stand back and let tariffs be put on our food, pushing more of those families into poverty, if we end up with no deal? It will not be Government Ministers or the hard-liners who pay the price; it will be the poorest families in the country.

We have also had warnings about the real threat to national security. Last week, the country's most senior counter-terrorism police officer, Neil Basu, described no deal as a "very bad place" for this country and Europe, because we will lose the crucial databases and criminal tools that we use. The top police officers who are making those warnings are not "Project Fear." Their job is to reassure, and they work and they cope with whatever situation people throw at them, and when they are warning of the risks of no deal, we should be supporting them and not making it harder for them to do their crucial job of keeping us safe.

I know how hard this debate is for many on both sides of the House. Accusations, false claims, fake news and abuse are being thrown about, and I know how hard it seems to have become to have a calm, common-sense debate without words being lifted or twisted. I know, too, how much many people want somebody else to take responsibility, and I fear that that is what the Prime Minister and Ministers want, but we cannot be cowardly about it.

The Prime Minister is running out of time. Too few dare say it, but everyone knows it. Before it is too late, we have to be honest. I urge people to support amendment (b) to give the House a chance to discuss the Bill, because if we cannot be honest at such an historic time, I do not know what politics is for.

Mr Speaker

Order. An eight-minute limit applies with immediate effect.

16:27:00

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con)

I cannot deny that I have found the process of Brexit one of the most wearisome and unpleasant periods of my time in this House, but the cloud has a little bit of a silver lining. I find this afternoon that an amendment I first proposed last summer, which was vehemently denounced by some of my hon. and right hon. Friends as being about to break the party apart, and that I brought back just before Christmas, and passed with the help of many hon. and right hon. Members, now appears to have something to commend it to the very people who denounced it then. I note with pleasure that amendment (n) appears to command some support among Conservative Members, and from my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, but it could not even have been brought up for consideration if the system that had been devised for this House, simply to have motions in neutral terms be unamendable, had been followed. I derive some slight satisfaction from that.

I now tempt the House to accept another amendment, amendment (g), and I will briefly explain why. We are mired in complete paralysis. The deal that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister brought back, which I suspect is probably the best deal available, does not commend itself to many of my hon. and right hon. Friends. If they voted to leave, it does not meet their dreams at all. What about somebody like myself? When I look at the deal objectively, from the point of view of an ex-remainer, I simply cannot understand how we are going to be better off leaving on such terms than remaining in the European Union.

Sir William Cash

Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr Grieve

No, I am going to make some progress, if I may.

In those circumstances, we have to find a way forward. Throughout the times that I have tabled amendments for this House to consider, I have tried to avoid objectives and look at process. Frankly, we could do with more days of debate of this sort unless or until we reach agreement. Of course, if we do reach agreement, with this amendment we can have another business of the House motion and we will just drop the remaining sitting days. It is rather sensible to set aside six days between now and the end of March when this House can debate, free of the interference of government, which I have to say I am afraid has sought consistently to restrict debate into an absolute straitjacket of what it wanted to hear and nothing else. If we have those days, it will help us, just as we are actually starting to tease out this afternoon, to make a little bit of progress towards compromise.

Of course my views are well known about the desirability of a further referendum, and I will come back to them right at the end, but I am perfectly aware that many Members in this House do not agree with that, even if they also share my regret at what we are doing in leaving the EU. But that in no way diminishes for me the value of these days, and I agree entirely with the Father of the House and with my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) that the idea that this is some constitutional abomination simply does not bear scrutiny; we are in control of our Standing Orders and changing them in this way to get the debates we need is entirely in keeping with the traditions of this House and the fact that the Government, in this area, simply do not enjoy the majority that some Governments have normally used to suppress it.

Sir William Cash

Somebody who refers to national suicide, as my right hon. and learned Friend did the other day, is now moving towards a proposition that involves constitutional homicide, but let me put it another way. Does he agree that he voted for the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, which states unequivocally that the European Communities Act 1972 will be expressly repealed? Therefore, is what he is now saying going to contradict that, because he does not want the 1972 Act to be expressly repealed—yes or no?

Mr Grieve

I say to my hon. Friend that he is familiar enough with the constitutions of this country and this House to know that this House can propose, debate, pass and revoke laws—we do it quite often sometimes, including laws that have never actually been implemented. So this House can do what it thinks is right at any given moment, and that is the flexibility we need. I tabled my amendment in the spirit of trying to reach some sort of understanding of where the majority might lie to bring this unhappy episode to a conclusion. I have also made it clear that in doing that one has to keep in mind and respect the decision of the earlier referendum, but that does not mean—I will come back to this in a moment as well—that one simply says that one is going to drag the country out on terms that nobody very much seems to support and towards a future that on the face of it looks pretty bad. To do that would be an abdication of our responsibility.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has also said that this House should say what it wants and what it does not want. May I say to her that knowing what one does not want can be quite a good starting place to understanding where compromise is reached over what one is prepared to accept? There are amendments down this evening on no deal that I shall support, because it is quite clear to me that this House utterly rejects no deal. Therefore, I will vote for those as well and I ask the House to vote for my amendment, which is neutral in objective but which will give us the opportunity we need to continue developing the debate we have to have if we are to resolve this matter sensibly.

There is then amendment (n), which I have to say is quite tempting in some ways. Our party has deep divisions over Brexit, and we know the pleasure we get when, because of the respect and affection we have for each other, we can all vote together. We did it when we supported my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on the motion of confidence. For that reason, it is very tempting to be told that we should just vote for amendment (n) and send some message that we might just be close to resolving our disagreements with the EU, and doing it collectively. I have some slight anxiety about this, however.

The backstop is indeed a rather humiliating thing, which is why Democratic Unionist party Members do not like it. As a Unionist, I can understand that, to the bottom of my heart, because it highlights the fact that when we leave the EU, the EU is going to continue to have a hold constitutionally over some of the things that we do. But the truth is that the backstop is just the outward sign of a much more profound truth: that ever since we signed up to the Good Friday agreement to resolve, on a permanent basis, an outstanding constitutional issue of identity on the island of Ireland, we have bound ourselves to keep an open border. The unpleasant truth is that that is incompatible with the aim of some hon. and right hon. Friends, who want to take us to a future in which we diverge on tariffs and regulation, and which inevitably therefore leads to a hard border having to be introduced.

I fear that our being asked to support amendment (n) this evening is a piece of displacement activity—something in which I am afraid the House has specialised in the past two and a half years, and which one often sees young children doing when they are asked to face up to something they do not like. That seems to me to be what the amendment is about because, first, it is quite clear that the EU will not negotiate on it—although I do accept that if you do not ask, you do not get—and secondly, even if we were to get the backstop removed, the trouble is that what some of my hon. and right hon. Friends are asking for is inevitably going to bring this conflict into the open once we are gone. If I may gently say so to them, this is one of the issues that we need to debate in those six days that I hope I may have set aside for the House. There is a lack of trust about future intention that makes 29 March completely irrelevant, because the truth is that the disputes about the nature of our state and how we relate to those around us will resume immediately afterwards.

For those reasons, I am afraid I cannot support amendment (n), but I am delighted to have provided—if only by my previous amendment, at least—an opportunity to this House to start having a dialogue. I very much hope we can pursue that.

16:37:00

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab)

I think we all realise that today's debate is predominantly about process, but that cannot hide one essential truth: we are facing a crisis; our country is in a state of suspended animation because of that crisis; and the intemperate nature of the debate—partly here today and certainly outside the Chamber—is a consequence of that crisis, because in truth every single one of us present is anxious about what is going to happen to our country.

Following the defeat of the Prime Minister's withdrawal agreement and political declaration, she said that she would reach out, and I welcomed that, although it would have been much better had it been done two years ago. We now know that she is not for turning on the political declaration but seeks somehow to change the backstop. I am all for optimism, but I somehow doubt that the EU is for turning on this issue either. Unless the Prime Minister knows something that we do not, I do not see how it is going to be changed.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab)

Is my right hon. Friend aware of the fact that Guy Verhofstadt has today said:

“The deal we have is fair and cannot be re-negotiated. The backstop is needed because of UK red lines and was crafted by the UK and the EU to secure the Good Friday Agreement...We remain open to positive changes regarding the future relationship and it is time for a more consensual cross-party approach to deliver this”?

Does that not make it absolutely clear that the Prime Minister’s approach is a charade, and it needs to be stopped now?

Hilary Benn

I fear that my hon. Friend is right, as the Prime Minister will find out. She will have to return to the House, I suspect, and say, “I am sorry, but I could not get the thing to which some Members object removed.” I simply say that if Members do not want Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom to have different rules, and if they want to ensure that, in all circumstances, goods can flow freely without tariffs, delays, paperwork or checks then it is the political declaration that needs to be changed.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab)
rose—

Hilary Benn

I will give way, but then I want to make progress.

Mr McFadden

In supporting amendment (n), the Prime Minister has driven a coach and horses through the deal that she asked us to endorse a fortnight ago. If my right hon. Friend is right that she cannot secure legal change in the withdrawal agreement, what can she come back with on 13 February?

Hilary Benn

Well, in truth, it is very hard to see what she can come back with if my right hon. Friend is correct in his assessment. It is odd, to put it very gently, that we are spending so much time on the backstop, which is something that the Government signed up to more than a year ago, when we really should be debating the most important issue: the future of our relationship with our European neighbours. The reason why the defeat was so large, certainly in relation to those on the Opposition Benches, is that we are not prepared to sign up to a deal that, far from giving the nation certainty about the future of that relationship, has shrouded it in fog and mist that is entirely of the Government’s own making. My preferred approach, as Members will probably know, is to be part of the European economic area and a customs union. Other Members have different views, which is why I put down the amendment calling for indicative votes as recommended by the Select Committee. Although the Prime Minister today appeared to be unenthusiastic about indicative votes, she spent most of her speech hoovering up indicative suggestions, mainly from those on her own Benches. I gently say to her that, one day, she may find herself climbing into the “little rubber life-raft”—to quote a former Prime Minister—of indicative votes. Until that central issue is addressed and until the Government are honest with the House about the choices that we have to make, we will continue to remain in our current state—businesses will continue to remain uncertain about their future and, frankly, the public will continue to ask us, “What on earth is going on?” That brings me to the amendments that seek to prevent us from leaving the EU without an agreement in just 59 days’ time.

Sir Oliver Letwin

Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that if we are to succeed in using indicative votes as a process for getting to resolution, hon. Members on both sides of the House and from all parts of the House will have to be willing to sacrifice their first preference and ask instead the question, “What can I tolerate?”

Hilary Benn

I say to the right hon. Gentleman, as I have said to the House before, in the end, if we are to make progress, people will have to compromise. It is a very British tradition, which seems to be somewhat lacking in the process at the moment.

The Select Committee took a lot of evidence and we came to a very, very stark conclusion, and I will quote what we said:

“A ‘managed no deal’ cannot constitute the policy of any responsible Government.”

I do not think that that conclusion will come as a surprise to the Prime Minister. She knows it, most of the Cabinet know it, business knows it and the House knows that the damage that would be inflicted, and the sheer practical difficulties of leaving on 29 March, mean that this is an outcome that cannot possibly be contemplated. I know there are those on the Government Benches who say, “Oh, it’s all exaggerated.” What I do not understand is why it is that they, with great respect, appear to know more about the consequences of no deal than do the businesses that import things, that make things and that export things.

David T. C. Davies

rose—

Hilary Benn

No, I will not give way.

Those businesses do not want tariffs, bureaucracy, delays and checks. The truth is that no one has any idea about what customs officers in Calais will do on the first day and the second day if there is a no-deal Brexit, but, eventually, those officers will have to start checking goods, because we will be a third country. Every lorry that is stopped—

Charlie Elphicke

Will the right hon. Gentleman give way.

Hilary Benn

No, I will not give way.

Charlie Elphicke

On that point—

Hilary Benn

No.

The lorries will be backed up from Dover, and a lorry stuck on the M20 cannot be in Germany to pick up the car parts that car plants in Britain require in order to function.

When we add in what my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) said about security in her powerful speech, as well as the uncertainty for citizens here and abroad—maybe some British citizens will feel that they must return to the United Kingdom because of that uncertainty—then we realise why this is a prospect that cannot be contemplated. I would not want to be the Government who had to explain to the British people why these things were happening, when the Government were responsible in the first place.

Although many of us may still cling to the hope that the Prime Minister will not take us out of the EU with no deal, I am not absolutely sure. That is why I will vote enthusiastically for amendment (b) in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford and amendment (g) in the name of the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve).

Charlie Elphicke

On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker

I hope that this is a point of order, not a point of frustration or irritation, which would be an abuse of the procedures of the House.

Charlie Elphicke

I do not wish the House to be inadvertently misled. The proportion of lorries that are checked is 1.3%.

Mr Speaker

I am immensely grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but that is an expression of opinion and political debate, which is not a matter for arbitration by the Chair.

Hilary Benn

I shall also vote for amendment (j) tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), and amendment (i) in the names of the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey).

Whatever happens, it is now quite clear that we are going to need more time. One day, the Prime Minister will stand up at the Dispatch Box—unless she is required by the House to do so before then—and say, “I am now applying for an extension to article 50.” Although she may not be willing today to face up to the real choices that confront us, the day will soon come when she will have to, because there is a choice to be made in this House about the future relationship that we want.

As the Prime Minister is asking for suggestions, here is mine: we should ask the European Union now to negotiate the details of the future relationship. When the EU says, “Well, we can’t do that; of course we can’t sign an agreement”, we can point to paragraph 23 of the political declaration, which mentions

“no tariffs, fees, charges or quantitative restrictions”.

It talks about building and improving on

“the single customs territory...which obviates the need for checks on rules of origin.”

Note that it says “no tariffs”, not zero tariffs. No tariffs means a customs union. The problem is that the Prime Minister cannot bring herself to say those words. If we have been able, in the negotiations

thus far, to reach agreement on something as specific as no tariffs, there is no reason in principle that we cannot do the same with all the other things that need to be sorted out. If that did happen, the fears on the Government Benches and the Opposition Benches about what the future relationship might look like could be resolved, and at that point, while remaining members of the EU, we could vote on whether we accepted the withdrawal agreement.

While I very much hope that the House of Commons will take control of the process, I absolutely agree with the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield, when he said that there is nothing unconstitutional about us doing our job. There is nothing unconstitutional about my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford in effect bringing forward a private Member's Bill and, through her amendment— if it is successful—putting it on the Order Paper for 5 February.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con)
Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Hilary Benn
I am concluding.

We pass private Members' Bills every year and there is nothing wrong about that. We need to take control of the process because the Government have clearly lost control of it. The moment will come when we have to decide what we want, and not just how we get to the point of decision. For any progress to be made on that in future, what we will need more than anything else—the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) alluded to this in his intervention—is open minds, rather than minds that are closed to the risks that are now facing our country.

Mr Speaker
There is now a six-minute time limit.

16:48:00

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con)
It is always a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), who spoke with great wisdom and clarity, as always.

A no-deal Brexit would have not just a huge economic cost, but a huge human cost, and that is what drove me to table amendment (i). The hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) and I are co-authors of this amendment, and we are neighbours. We have seen the lives of our constituents transformed by the renaissance of manufacturing in our region. It now exports more than any other region to the EU, which is its principal market. But Brexit is putting this at risk. As a group of cross-party MPs, we began meeting six months ago to discuss how to help, as we are already losing jobs—not just because of Brexit, but it has made it worse. We co-authored a letter to the Prime Minister calling for a no-deal Brexit to be ruled out, and I thank those who signed it. It attracted 225 signatures from MPs of six parties from all over Britain. The signatories are remainers and leavers, but we agree on one thing—we are against a no-deal Brexit.

Hardly a day goes by without another business calling for no deal to be prevented. Yesterday, it was the supermarkets which fear their shelves will be empty. Before that, it was the security analysts advising us of increased risks and before that, Airbus, Rolls-Royce, Siemens, Ford, and the National Farmers Union and other farming organisations. The list is simply endless. The CBI has described

this as a monumental act of self-harm to be avoided at all costs. Crashing out without a deal simply makes our exports instantly less competitive.

The Government say that it is not their policy to leave with no deal, so let us rule it out. The threat of no deal has been used as a stick to get more concessions, but in my view that card has played out. It has not secured the needed changes, as on the backstop, for example. So as a former negotiator, I would flip that card round the other way as a carrot, offering to take no deal off the table in return for concessions that will get the deal over the line.

I want to be clear: I am not blocking Brexit. I am committed to honouring the referendum result. I voted for the withdrawal agreement; I have read all 585 pages. I urge colleagues perhaps to have a fresh look at it. It may not be perfect, but local businesses tell me that it is good enough and works for them.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con)

In addition to the businesses themselves, does my right hon. Friend welcome the communications from the workers in those businesses, particularly Jaguar Land Rover, who have communicated with Members of Parliament such as myself to tell me their concerns about a no-deal Brexit?

Dame Caroline Spelman

My hon. Friend is quite right. As a fellow west midlander, he will know that many of us had a personal handwritten letter, or an original email, about the impact—the human cost—on our constituents' lives, which we simply cannot ignore.

I know that others need persuading about the withdrawal agreement. I encourage colleagues to read the document produced by the House of Commons Library, “What if there’s no Brexit deal?” This document could usefully inform six days of debate, because we ought to debate what the House of Commons Library tells us are the really important issues that we need to consider.

Heidi Allen

Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Dame Caroline Spelman

I am short of time now, so I ask my hon. Friend to allow me to continue.

As no deal looms, just think of the human cost. Hundreds of young people like the single mums on my council estates got apprenticeships, then well-paid work in manufacturing, and now their jobs are at risk. Voting no to no deal means that we must agree a deal. The longer the uncertainty continues, the harder it gets for business. Stockpiling is costly and inefficient—the cost comes off the bottom line, and in the end that costs jobs. Just-in-time supply chains will be “not-in-time” with any hold-up at the border, and some factories are already stopping production to limit the disruption.

If we agree that no deal is not an option, then it is incumbent on all party leaders to get round the table—and I think I heard the Leader of the Opposition say today that he would. The Malthouse initiative is an example of a new contribution to break the deadlock. But to negotiate any new deal with the EU will take time and cause an inevitable delay, and I am with the Leader of the House in trying to keep delay to a minimum. The Leader of the Opposition does not seem to have read my amendment because he thinks that it calls for a delay. It does not, because time costs money for business.

We know that there is a majority for “no to no deal” in this Parliament because it was voted on as part of the Finance Bill, but the sheer complexity of that put some people off, including me. So this is a simple vote on whether colleagues support no deal or not. As the commentators say, it is not “processy”. I am surprised that, having been defeated on this issue once, the Government might still want to whip against this amendment—but then, these are not normal times in politics.

The public are weary with the Brexit debate. It is not quick and painless, as promised. They want us to come together in the national interest, and we can do that by agreeing that no to no deal means that there has to be a deal. I am not a natural rebel. Indeed, I do not accept that label as someone supporting something that commands a majority in this House. I see that the Speaker’s chaplain is here to remind us all that we need to be respectful. I am a peacemaker, and I urge all parties in the House to come together in an outbreak of pragmatism and to agree a deal. To vote for my amendment commits us all to that quest.

16:55:00

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD)

We have had an emotional and raucous debate, whereas, as the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) said, the people outside are looking for something rather more calm, deliberative and constructive.

The central issue we are addressing today is how we dispose of the no-deal option. As the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) pointed out, there is an overwhelming majority in this place to do that, and a whole series of amendments have been tabled to achieve it. The amendments go about it in different ways: the amendment tabled by the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) is a declaratory statement; the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield wants a better process; and the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) and the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford want more time. None of the amendments in themselves provides a solution, but they are an important and positive step on the way, and we should support them.

The issue we have to address is why the whole concept of no deal is out there. Let us be clear: it is a choice. It will not be imposed on the UK by the European Union. The UK has the legal authority to stop it, and if it is not stopped, it is a choice. It is out there because there is a complex game of chicken going on. The option of no deal was used initially to try to frighten the European Union, which had no effect whatever. It has been used to frighten wavering Members of Parliament; we will see how many do waver. It certainly had an impact on frightening business.

One thing that worries me about today’s debate is that this game of chicken has now acquired a dangerous new twist. If there is support for the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady), the Government will go back to Europe to ask for what they call “alternative arrangements”, but we have no idea what those are. I have heard no mention today of Chequers. Does anybody remember Chequers? Six months ago, the Prime Minister held a special summit to discuss alternative arrangements. The best brains in Britain were employed to look at technological solutions, and the others were rejected. There were no alternative arrangements. Has somebody invented something in the last six months? If so, we have not been told about it. I am not always cynical, but I think there is nothing in it, although that remains to be seen.

The Government will go back to the European Union, and the EU will be very polite—I think it genuinely wants to help the Government—but it will ask, “What is all this about?” and it will say

no, not because it wants to but because it has to. The Government will then come back here, and there will be another round of anger. I am sure that it will not be the Prime Minister or the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West, but people will say, “Ah, you see? It’s all these bloody Europeans. They’re blocking it and pushing us out. They’re going to cause mayhem. It’s all their fault.” The ugly nationalism lurking under the surface will bubble up. That is what is in store, and the Government’s action today makes that more likely.

We talk about no deal as if it is a hypothetical possibility, but it is real, and it is now. Partly because of the job I had in the coalition Government, I spend a lot of time talking to businesses big and small around the country, and they all say to me that no deal is happening now. They are having contracts cancelled, either directly or because a company down the supply chain is losing a contract. They are piling up inventories that they do not need, at great cost. Estate agents are having travel cancelled because of the need for three months’ notice. The impact is already being felt. Companies are absorbing it, as they would, but a few months down the track, the economic impact will be very real.

The private enterprise system depends on what Keynes called “animal spirits”, and one of the animal spirits is panic. There is a real danger now of panic getting hold in the way it did 10 years ago in a different way in the financial crisis. The longer we leave no deal on the table, the greater the risk of that happening and of its consequences.

There are other alternatives, and there is one we are not discussing tonight. The Prime Minister is quite right when she says, as she often does, that the alternative to no deal is a deal. She is absolutely right, but there are two deals already on the table: there is the one she has negotiated, and the one we already have. There is also the option that we are not debating today, but which I think we will probably come back to, of saying we should put that choice to the public. The Government say this is horrendous and that it will stir up deep social divisions, but I just ask her to consider whether the social divisions that might be accentuated in that way are greater than the social divisions that would be created if we have a no-deal world, which we are in danger of heading towards. That is why I and my Liberal Democrat colleagues will return—I am sure there will be a greater appetite for this in a few weeks’ time—to considering the option of going back to the public to have the final say.

17:00:00

Sir Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con)

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling me. I think the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) should beware that, while perhaps not wishing to do so, he may sometimes be talking up the possibility of panic and spreading gloom and despondency unnecessarily. I have a short time available to me, but I will take less than the six minutes if I possibly can, because my points are few and simple.

In the more than 21 years since I have been in the House, I have to say that this is the first time I have experienced tabling an amendment and then winning the support of a Prime Minister for it. In her opening remarks, the Prime Minister did of course mention amendment (n). I rise to support the amendment that stands in my name and those of my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), the Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee—elected, of course, by the whole House—and my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green), as well as many others on both sides of the House.

I will oppose the amendments that seek to delay the article 50 process and those that might rule out some of the options. I do so without any suggestion that these are necessarily deliberately intended to damage the process of Brexit, but I think they carry considerable dangers in them. Those who seek to delay the process risk removing the pressure point or decision point—the moment of decision—that is bringing greater focus to the negotiations at this point. It has been palpable in the last couple of weeks that we have seen more evidence of flexibility from the EU side in the negotiations and a greater willingness to look at how it might assist the United Kingdom to come to an arrangement with which we can agree that can take us out of the European Union in an orderly and managed way. There is a real danger in that.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab)

What legally binding change to the arrangements does the hon. Gentleman now feel the EU will sign up to that it would not have signed up to a few weeks ago?

Sir Graham Brady

I will come on to those matters. I have very little time, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that that is my intention in speaking in this debate.

First, however, I wish to turn to the amendments that deal with procedure. I entirely accept what my right hon. and learned Friend the Father of the House said: it is the right of this House to change procedure. However, I would make a slightly different point, which is that I think it is unwise to change procedure without forethought. It is unwise to change procedure on the hoof or to do it for a particular purpose.

Heidi Allen

Does my hon. Friend appreciate that the reason why Members on both sides of the House are having to table such amendments is that we have had over two years of Parliament not being involved in the biggest decision facing our country for generations? The fact that we have been ignored means we have not been able, in a representative democracy, to represent our constituents.

Sir Graham Brady

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) made it very clear that he welcomed some of the changes that have taken place, as well as the debate that we are having, but that was not a dramatic procedural change; I am talking about things that go right to the heart of how this place is run. As Mr Speaker will recall, many years ago I had the pleasure of serving on the Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons, which became known as the Wright Committee, and I have a long history of interest in reform of Parliament. I am very proud of changes that we achieved, and we sought to achieve others as well. However, I warn colleagues of the danger of doing these things without considerable forethought and consideration; we are often stuck with changes for many years or decades, and they can have unintended consequences.

I shall speak briefly to my amendment (n). I tabled it having seen the agreement reached at Chequers, and the progress made towards a withdrawal agreement that clearly not all of us could embrace with great enthusiasm. It became obvious to me, for a variety of reasons, including the fact that we do not have an overall majority in the House of Commons and the complexity of the arrangements, that it would be necessary to compromise. As we worked towards the withdrawal agreement, I thought we might reach a point at which there was a compromise that we could embrace, if only with a lack of huge enthusiasm. However, there was in the withdrawal agreement one compromise too far. It was not, it is important to say, the whole concept of a backstop. The compromise too far was the possibility that, as brought forward, the backstop arrangement, which was explicitly never intended to be other than temporary, could become a permanent arrangement,

and so lock in a situation in which Northern Ireland was treated differently from the rest of the United Kingdom perpetually, and in which the whole United Kingdom was locked in the customs union in perpetuity. That is why I could not support the withdrawal agreement when we voted two weeks ago, and I know it was the most important, but not the only, reason why so many Conservative colleagues—and, I think, Democratic Unionist colleagues—were unable to bring themselves to support the agreement.

After the defeat of the agreement by such a big majority, the fashionable idea took hold that there was simply nothing that the House could agree—no majority for any arrangement that could possibly deliver the result of the referendum and take us out of the European Union in an orderly fashion. I do not believe that that is true. I hope to demonstrate with amendment (n) that there is an agreement that can win majority support in the House of Commons. By voting for the amendment, we can send the Prime Minister back to Brussels to negotiate, having strengthened her hand.

Lady Hermon
rose—

Sir Graham Brady

I would very much like to give way to the hon. Lady, but I have used up my two allowed interventions.

We can send the Prime Minister back in a strengthened position, able to say that she has a real mandate from this House, and to ask for real change.

17:08:00

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab)

I rise to speak to amendment (j), which is in my name and the name of other hon. and right hon. Members, and to express support for the amendments tabled by the Leader of the Opposition, by my right hon. Friends the Members for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), by the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), and by the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve).

I am motivated to move amendment (j) because I want so much to rule out leaving without a deal on 29 March. If there is just a month before we are due to leave the European Union and we do not have a deal, extending article 50 is the way to achieve ruling that out. I come to this debate with the evidence we have taken on the Select Committee on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy ringing in my ears. Businesses have many views about where, and with what sort of deal, they want to end up, but what unites them is a determination not to crash out of the European Union without any deal at all, because of the impact that would have on free and frictionless trade, which businesses have grown to rely on through our membership of the European Union over the past decades.

We heard evidence from Honda, which warned our Select Committee that every 15 minutes of delay at the border cost £850,000; from the Food and Drink Federation, which talked about how European businesses could

“hoover up the markets that have previously been well served by UK companies”;

from pharmaceutical companies; and most recently from the British Retail Consortium.

Emma Reynolds

Does my hon. Friend agree that the threat of no deal is already having a material effect? Businesses in the west midlands tell me that they are already putting orders on hold and withdrawing or postponing investment decisions because of the threat of no deal.

Rachel Reeves

I absolutely agree. Passing my amendment would give the certainty to businesses that we will not crash out, and that they do not have to look to offshore more work and potentially lay off more workers to build up their inventory supply. It will give workers certainty. Trade unions are also saying that the very worst thing for our economy and for people working in our economy is to crash out without a deal. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford said, it will also provide assurance to families and pensioners, particularly those on fixed incomes who are incredibly worried about the rising costs of essentials in the shops when they are already struggling with the cost of living.

Mark Pawsey

The hon. Lady is a very effective Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee. She heard, as I did, businesses argue for no deal, but in the main businesses say they recognise that the Prime Minister's deal, while having many faults, is better than the continued uncertainty. Why is the hon. Lady not able to accept that contention from the businesses we have heard? Why does she think that her method of continuing the process is better than accepting what we heard businesses say?

Rachel Reeves

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He and the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) are fantastic members of my Select Committee—as are all the members. The deal has been rejected; all my amendment says is that, if we get to 26 February and we still have agreed not agreed a deal just 31 days before we are due to leave the European Union, we need at that point to have in place a mechanism to give us more time. That is simply what my amendment would do. It does not propose that we extend article 50 today and it does not come to a conclusion about the final deal, but it does say that we need time to get this right, to secure a deal so that we do not crash out without a deal. For business and, as other Members have said, for policing and security, we must avoid the chaos that we all know will occur if we crash out without a deal. I believe that the Prime Minister knows that too. The amendment would give her and the Government the space to get the right deal.

The most obvious way to ensure that we do not leave without a deal is to take no deal on 29 March off the table. The way to do that is to put in its place this mechanism to extend article 50 if we get to 26 February without having secured a deal. It will give us the time we desperately need to get this right. It is exactly the opposite of the dangerous tactic of running down the clock and putting pressure on Members to agree a deal that many of us think and believe very strongly is a bad deal for our country.

Mr Betts

Will my hon. Friend give way?

Rachel Reeves

I will not give way, because of the time, if that is okay.

My amendment is very simple. It calls on the Government to extend article 50 in the event that we do not have a deal by 26 February. The Prime Minister could still come back to the House on 13 or

14 February and if she can get her deal through Parliament, the amendment will become irrelevant. The Prime Minister still has another month to secure agreement, but the amendment would give us further time if that is necessary. My amendment does not specify an amount of time for which we should extend article 50. It would be up to the Government to agree that with our counterparts in the European Union.

My amendment differs from amendment (b) tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford. My right hon. Friend, rightly, is trying to secure through legislation an extension to article 50 if needed, because so many of us have lost trust and lost faith in this Government. They have let us down on too many occasions. My amendment does not seek to go as far, although I very much support her amendment and will be voting for it this evening.

There are many alternatives, so let us explore them with the time that we have left. Let us try to find consensus and compromise. Let us not box ourselves in, get this wrong and have to live with the consequences either of a bad deal or of crashing out without a deal. We are all under conflicting pressures. We have duties to our constituents and obligations to our parties, and we must also listen to our consciences. I believe that, on issues such as this, we must put those interests aside and act in the national interest. We must rise to that challenge when we vote this evening.

My message to right hon. and hon. Members about the merits of my amendment, and why I hope they will support it, is straightforward. If they voted leave and want to see Brexit resolved but are worried about the danger of a no-deal Brexit, it would remove that risk. If they are pushing for a Norway-plus solution, it would keep open that possibility. If they are looking to protect environmental standards, consumer and workers' rights, the customs union and a strong single market deal, it would allow them to continue making that argument and win it. If they want a people's vote, but accept that the immediate priority must be to take no deal off the table, it is a key part of that process.

With the countdown clock ticking down by the day, we must all work together and agree a way forward by joining forces to end any prospect of a no-deal Brexit. We must have time to come up with a workable solution. We must not let down our country and crash out of the European Union without a deal, so I urge hon. Members to support my amendment.

Mr Speaker

A five-minute limit now applies.

17:16:00

Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con)

It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), who made her case powerfully and cogently. I want to strengthen the hand of this Prime Minister and this Government in returning to Brussels. I believe that there is a range of changes that would render the withdrawal agreement—in particular, the backstop—acceptable to me and to hon. Members across the House.

There could be a sunset mechanism or an exit mechanism, over which we exercise control but with assurances to our friends and partners in Dublin about its exercise. I listened very carefully to the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable), who talked about whether that is possible. It is possible. Michel Barnier said very clearly on 24 January, in relation to a no-deal scenario, that the EU side

“would be obliged to carry out controls on goods arriving in the Republic of Ireland. My team have worked hard to study how controls can be made paperless or decentralised, which will be useful in all circumstances.”

He later confirmed and clarified:

“We will have to find an operational way of carrying out checks and controls without putting back in place a border”.

We must be clear that this is not a question of whether it can be done; it is a political choice. Paragraph 23 of the political declaration was clarified to make clear a transition to a best-in-class free trade agreement.

In the brief time available, let me address the two key amendments. I listened very carefully to the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), and I am worried about the constitutional precedent that she would set. Most of all, her amendment and the Bill that would follow purport to be neutral in relation to process, but in their substance they are a Pandora’s box. They would mandate a nine-month extension for negotiations, but the EU has ruled out such a long extension.

Yvette Cooper

To make it absolutely clear, the intention is not to mandate nine months. I think that would be very unhelpful. The point is that any motion that is tabled at the end of February should be amendable, and it should be for the House to decide at that point. If necessary, we can make that clearer as the Bill progresses to avoid any unhelpful conclusions.

Dominic Raab

I thank the right hon. Lady for that, but the Bill states nine months very clearly, and the EU has made it clear that it would need to know the strategic objective of any extension.

Nick Boles (Grantham and Stamford) (Con)

rose—

Mr Harper

rose—

Dominic Raab

I will make a bit of progress, and then I will certainly take at least one more intervention.

The Bill nowhere sets out the substance of the approach that the right hon. Lady would seek to pursue. It is not clear if it is the Norway option or the second referendum option. It is neutral—in fact, it is empty—on the substance. I have listened to her carefully and with respect throughout these debates, and I will take her advice. Back in February 2018, she said:

“The Government have said they do not want to be in the single market, but they have not told us what they want instead... the clock is ticking and when you are running out of time, you cannot keep kicking the can down the road”—[Official Report, 5 February 2018; Vol. 635, c. 1212-13.]

And yet that is precisely what her amendment and Bill would do. Just last November, on the 500 pages of the Government’s withdrawal agreement and political declaration, she said to the House:

“This is not a deal for the future; it is just a stopgap... We have no idea where this is heading”—[Official Report, 26 November 2018; Vol. 650, c. 33.]

Again, I gently and respectfully say that her amendment and Bill are vulnerable to the very charge that she herself levelled at the Government and the Prime Minister. Just moments ago—I listened to her speech carefully and with respect—she talked about avoiding a blindfold Brexit, but I am afraid her approach is precisely a blindfold approach.

It is not clear whether the right hon. Lady backs the Norway option or a second referendum, but I worry most that, as she said, the period is amendable. Without her setting out a positive proposal, I am afraid there is the understandable fear that it is a ruse to reverse or frustrate Brexit. There will be people who, because of the absence of her setting out a substantive credible alternative, will fear just that.

Nick Boles

My right hon. Friend persists in ignoring what the right hon. Lady told him about the true intention of the Bill, which I support. It is very clear that, if amendment (b) were passed, there would be two opportunities to amend the length of the extension, both during the Bill’s passage through all its Commons stages next Tuesday, when a majority would be required, and through the motion the Government would need to table on 26 February. It is entirely scurrilous to suggest there is a hidden plot to revoke Brexit when both she and I have been explicit that we would never vote for it. The only way it could be amended is if there was a majority in Parliament.

Dominic Raab

The problem my hon. Friend has is that, although he has powerfully made the case for the Norway option, I have also read the cogent case made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) in The Sunday Times for why that is wrong and we should have a second referendum. With just two months to go until Brexit, the amendment is a climbing frame for everyone with a different view. I fear most, however, that this would encourage the EU to delay at the 11th hour of the negotiations in the hope that we will settle for worse terms and undermine the Prime Minister at exactly the point we need to reinforce her hand.

I turn to amendment (n), tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady). Initially, I thought this rather a vague amendment, but I understand precisely what he is seeking to achieve. The Government should have tabled an amendment of their own, but the Prime Minister has come to the Chamber and given three assurances: one, that the changes we will seek will be legally binding changes to the withdrawal agreement; two, that she will seriously consider the substantive proposals in what I can only call the Mogg-Morgan-Malthouse compromise; and three, that the revised deal will be returned to this House for a further, effectively meaningful vote. On that basis, I will vote for the amendment. I want to send the Prime Minister back to Brussels with a strong and clear sense of what this House will accept. That is the best way—in fact, the only way—to get a deal acceptable to the House and the country.

17:24:00

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP)

It is a privilege to follow the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab). Let me say at the outset that we have had very good discussions with the Government and, indeed, with Back Benchers in both parties in recent days, and that, for the reasons that he gave, we agree that the right approach is to vote for amendment (n) in order to give the Prime Minister the backing that will

indicate to the European Union that there is a way through this which can command support in the House.

The Prime Minister's agreement to bring back any final deal for a meaningful vote, the fact that she will seek legally binding changes, what she has said about reopening the withdrawal agreement, and the fact that serious consideration will be given to options that can bring together those on the Brexiteer and remain sides of the argument are all powerful reasons for supporting the amendment. I believe that there is a way through the current difficulties and deadlock, but some of the options presented in other amendments do not, in my view, command a majority. We must be realistic about that.

We, certainly on these Benches, want a deal: we do not want a no-deal outcome. However, the idea of taking no deal off the table is more likely to lead to a no-deal outcome than anything else, because that is exactly what will ensure that the EU holds out and gives absolutely nothing in any future negotiations. I have dealt with the Irish Government—Irish Governments of different hues—over many years, and that is exactly the approach that they have told us they will take, so it should not come as any surprise.

The Prime Minister has focused on the issue of the backstop. We have some other issues with the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration, but the backstop is the main issue, and if it is dealt with, that will mean that we can get a withdrawal agreement through the House. I do not need to rehearse all the reasons why the backstop was so difficult for us as Unionists. However, the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) described it as damaging to the Union, the Father of the House, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) described it as a ridiculous proposition, and the Prime Minister herself has criticised it in strong terms as something that no one wants and everyone detests. Yet it remains at the heart of our debate. We must address the fact that with it in place, we cannot support the withdrawal agreement.

People say that the position cannot possibly be revised. However, as the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton has just said, Michel Barnier himself, when he had to deal this week with the criticism that came the way of the European Commission's spokesperson who had said that there would have to be a hard border in the event of no deal, said "No, no, there does not have to be one." I will not repeat the quotation that the right hon. Gentleman has just given, but the fact is that if we can have no hard border in a no-deal situation, that will certainly be possible in the event of a withdrawal agreement and a deal.

The position in the Irish Republic is not as homogeneous as people think. Its Prime Minister, Leo Varadkar, said the other day that in the event of no deal we would have to send troops to the Irish border. The Irish Government swiftly retreated from that. The Prime Minister was out in Davos. He may have been mixing with all sorts of characters—I do not know who those could possibly be—and he obviously got carried away with the rhetoric. Some wild stuff is being said.

One of the most damaging arguments, which is of concern to many Unionists—and we in the House speak for the vast bulk of Unionists who are concerned about the implications of the backstop—is that this is designed to protect the backstop and the Good Friday agreement, as amended by the St Andrews agreement. It does nothing of the sort. Lord Bew, one of the architects of, or the people behind, the Good Friday agreement, said in a recent article for Policy Exchange that it drives a coach and horses through the agreement. We need to be realistic about this.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP)

I believe that Lord Bew went even further in the other place last week, when he said:

“there is one great problem with the backstop: it does not protect the Good Friday agreement.”—
[Official Report, House of Lords, 5 December 2018; Vol. 794, c. 1012.]

He has made that point repeatedly. Surely that is the issue: as he has said, the backstop drives a coach and horses through the agreement.

Nigel Dodds

That is absolutely right, and I urge Members on both sides to read what Lord Bew has said. He voted remain, he is a supporter of the Good Friday agreement; read what he said about this, instead of listening to some of the myths that are about. For instance there is the myth that the open border is part of the Good Friday agreement—the Belfast agreement. The Belfast agreement does not mention anything to do with an open border; this is a complete myth. What we want in Northern Ireland—on all sides—is no hard border on the island of Ireland; we in our party are absolutely committed to no hard border on the island of Ireland, but not at the expense of creating borders down the Irish sea with our biggest market and affecting the integrity of the United Kingdom.

That has got to be the sensible position, and I believe now that if we get behind the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady) and send the Prime Minister out to Brussels with that strong support behind her, we can achieve something that people have said is not possible: we can get this deal sorted out for the good of all our country.

17:30:00

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con)

It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) as someone who was both present and involved when the confidence and supply arrangement was originally signed. I am delighted that it is in such robust health today.

I rise, as indeed the last two speakers did, to support amendment (n) in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady). I do so partly because the House now needs to say something positive. The Prime Minister was right when she said in her opening speech that we all know what we do not like collectively; we now have to start moving down the path quite quickly of things that we do like.

Three issues have arisen during this debate where I would invite Members on both sides to question the conventional wisdom. First, both sides appear to agree that there should be no more delay, but many in all parts of the House will be tempted by amendments tonight that will lead to more delay; that seems to me to be slightly incoherent. The second point that I have heard time and again is that there is something wrong with the Prime Minister radically changing the backstop arrangements when she put them forward so strongly. It seems to me that when something is put to the House of Commons and it is defeated by 230 votes there is a certain degree of common sense involved in changing it radically. That seems to me to be sensible. Thirdly, there is the temptation, not just of colleagues in this House but people outside, to assume that everything said by anyone representing the Commission, the European Parliament or any other European body must be taken as gospel whereas anything said by a British politician must be taken as a negotiating stance. Speaking as someone who is a lifelong pro-European and who campaigned hard for remain, I must say that we do need to show a bit more realism, and occasionally a bit more cynicism. Guy Verhofstadt has been quoted in this debate; good man though he is in many ways, I have never noticed him particularly advancing the interests of this country, nor is he paid to do so.

It is clear that given the result of the referendum—a narrow victory—the winners must win but the losing 48% who accept the result want a smooth and orderly Brexit. We need a new deal after the last vote and therefore several things are important. First, we need to start changing the tone of the debate both inside this Parliament and outside. We have seen some of the hatred and bile that has been introduced into our politics by the passions aroused on this, and it is the responsibility of all of us to try to drain that bile—to try to improve the tone of the debate. Apart from one or two instances at the start, it seems to me that our debate this afternoon is a model of how to do it. We all respect each other's views, and we know that everyone on all sides has strong views. Many of us who are not just, as it were, conventionally hon. Friends but are actual friends will be going into different Division Lobbies tonight, and that is as it should be as long as we can continue the civilised tone.

I support amendment (n) because it gives us the outline of a new deal that might be successful in negotiations with Europe and certainly gives the British Government a coherent position following the loss last time. I will not vote for any of the other amendments, partly for constitutional reasons. I think that the distinction between Parliament holding the Executive to account and Parliament trying to become a quasi-executive, even in limited terms, is a confusion that we should not consider.

Although other amendments are in some ways attractive, the amendment on the indicative vote is perhaps premature. I take the Prime Minister's point that those of us who are very against no deal will have an opportunity to express that opposition. I am absolutely at one with those colleagues who say that no deal would be a disaster.

Sir Oliver Letwin

I just want to understand the import of what my right hon. Friend is saying. He and I are genuine friends but we will go through different Lobbies to vote on the amendment tabled by the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). I will also vote for amendment (n), which obviously we hope will succeed, but if it does not succeed and the Prime Minister comes back in the middle of February, as she has said she will, unwilling to ask for a delay, would he then change his mind about the constitutional propriety of avoiding a no-deal exit through Parliament?

Damian Green

I am delighted that my right hon. Friend is asking me to address hypothetical questions. Let us see where we are in two weeks' time. Certainly, as I have said before, I will do whatever it takes to avoid a no-deal Brexit. The method chosen may not be exactly right, but he and others with immensely fertile brains may yet, I hope, have two weeks to think again or, even better, may not need to. I hope that the focusing of minds in this country is reflected by a focusing of minds in Brussels and, indeed, in Dublin.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con)

Does my right hon. Friend agree that much the best way of guaranteeing that no deal does not happen is to keep no deal on the table so that we keep pressure on the European Union to talk in a serious manner?

Damian Green

My right hon. Friend may well be right. Certainly, throughout the negotiations the Government have made the perfectly sensible point that anyone entering into a negotiation saying, "Whatever happens, I am going to take a deal at the end of it," is unlikely to get a particularly brilliant result. To some extent, that is what happened to the British Government in the negotiations before the referendum. We all know that one of the things that might have changed the result would have been if David Cameron had come back with a better and more generous deal from Europe. I think there is

a degree of validity in my right hon. Friend's point, even though I think this may be the first time we have ever agreed on a European issue in our more than 20 years in this House.

Today is obviously important for the Government and for the negotiations, and it is also important for Parliament, because it gives Parliament a chance to be positive—not just to reject a deal, but to point a way forward. In a terrible time for democratic politics, this would be a glimmer of hope—a shaft of light—to show that this House can contribute to finding a solution to the most difficult political problem that this country has faced for decades. I hope that today and over the coming days the House and the Government can rise to the gravity of that problem.

17:38:00

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab)

The Prime Minister came along this afternoon and encouraged Parliament to drive a coach and horses through the agreement that she spent two years concluding and hour after hour at the Dispatch Box defending. She had a choice when the House rejected that agreement a couple of weeks ago. She could have tried to form a coalition across the House for common ground, but instead she chose to throw her lot in with the ERG to try to revise the backstop—something she has repeatedly said could not be done. She made it clear today that she is talking not just about the future political declaration but about legal change to the withdrawal agreement itself.

It should be remembered that this backstop is not some foreign imposition. The commitment to no hard border arises out of commitments that we have made as a country and that we repeated in the December 2017 phase 1 agreement with the European Union, but now we are committed to watering it down or doing something to undermine it.

I speak today to support the amendments tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) and the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), which try to avoid no deal. There are two reasons why I think we should do that.

The first is responsibility. Leaving the European Union without a deal in place would have extremely damaging consequences for the country, and it is our duty as responsible politicians to try to avoid them. There has been a legion of warnings, so let me just mention a couple.

Last week, the chief executive of Airbus, which directly employs 14,000 people in the country and sustains many tens of thousands more jobs, including many in Wolverhampton's valuable aerospace cluster, warned that leaving on the basis of no deal would be a disaster, and the ideology behind it was "madness". For his pains, he was attacked on the basis of his nationality. What has happened to our politics when that is what happens?

Also last week, the Road Haulage Association warned of chaos in transport if we go down the no-deal route. Just yesterday, Britain's major food retailers warned of both shortages of food and higher prices for consumers if no deal happens. Who will pay the price for that? Our constituents on low incomes, who cannot afford higher food prices, as a result of right-wing nationalist ideology.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con)

I visited the port of Holyhead with at least one of the right hon. Gentleman's colleagues on Monday. They said that it was time that MPs dampened down the hysteria about no-deal Brexit, and

that they were quite prepared for it. That is what the officials in the port of Holyhead said to us yesterday.

Mr McFadden

I am quoting the chief executive of Airbus, the Road Haulage Association and the country's major food retailers. These are not my warnings—these are their warnings.

There was a time when such things would have carried some weight, but we are in a time when our politics has so changed that warnings such as these are simply dismissed as irrelevant. Even worse, there are voices who almost lust for the chaos. I believe that, as responsible politicians, we should not will an end that brings about job losses or rising prices for our constituents. It is not the rich, right-wing ideologues who will pay the price. It is people who work in the manufacturing industry and people who need affordable food prices in the shops.

There is a second reason to avoid no deal. There is the argument that somehow we just need to get this thing over the line; that people are bored of Brexit, and they just want this done. That is irresponsible. It is simply not the case that we will be able to stop talking about this on 30 March, because all the big questions about the future remain unanswered. They have not been left for another day because that is in the national interest; they have been left for another day because to make the fundamental choice would upset one part of the Conservative party and would mean the slaying of the Brexit unicorns.

Of course it is tempting to tick the box and get a deal—any deal—over the line. There is maybe part of us that wishes to say to our constituents, “We have delivered you Brexit, and if it turns out to be not what you wished, well, that is not our problem.” That is an irresponsible illusion. We do no service to the public if we try to pull the wool over their eyes in exchange for a quiet life for ourselves in the short term. I understand the temptations of it, because of course some people are angry and frustrated, but many more will be angry if we are not candid with them about the Brexit future ahead.

The second reason to avoid no deal and to have an extension is therefore the opportunity to give clarity on the future ahead. We have not done that so far. The Prime Minister's strategy is to avoid that for party reasons, to run down the clock and to have all the questions answered later. We have a greater duty to the country and our constituents, and that is the reason to avoid the strategy of running down the clock and to use an extension for the purpose of giving clarity about the country's future, on the basis of the reality of Brexit and not the irreconcilable promises made about it thus far.

17:44:00

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con)

Unlike the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), I am a very easy man to please. I voted for the Prime Minister's first deal, I shall vote for whatever she brings back and I am going to vote for the Brady amendment. I am past caring what deal we have, I will vote for it to get a smooth exit.

The fact is that tonight we are faced with a choice of huge significance for our country, but it is not about the deal we do or do not get eventually, which I suspect in the long run will have to be done through some kind of consensus we have not yet found in this House. We are not really voting about that tonight.

The 29th of March is not an abstract fact, it is going to happen. There is going to be a 29 March, which is a real day, and what we are really voting about tonight is the question whether, in the absence of this House taking action, we will leave the EU without a deal—in fact, in the absence of the House taking action tonight rather than two weeks from now, because I do not believe that vote is really going to happen. I am perfectly aware that some very old friends of mine, whose integrity and passion I respect and admire, believe that leaving without a deal is a perfectly tolerable outcome, or even a good outcome, for this country. I respect that opinion, but I do not share it.

I am also aware that many people think the Conservative party will suffer if it is seen in any way to do anything that delays the exit date. I accept that there is some suffering, and I have experienced some of it in my constituency. I have experienced some of it through the tirades of those who send me emails and the like. I accept that.

What my hon. Friends ignore is what will happen, first, to this country, which should be our first preoccupation, and, secondly, to our party if we leave on 29 March, taking the risks involved in not having a deal, and it goes wrong. Incidentally, I entirely accept that it might be perfectly all right, but it might not. If it is not, it will be Conservative Members and our Government—it will not be Opposition Members, some unseen force or the EU—to whom those difficulties will be attributed by the population of our country. When the people elect a Government, they expect that Government to look after them and not to impose risks and difficulties.

If those risks materialise, our party will not be forgiven for many years to come. It will be the first time that we have consciously taken a risk on behalf of our nation, and terrible things will happen to real people in our nation because of that risk, and we will not be able to argue that it was someone else's fault. I beg those Conservative Members who are still in doubt—I know there are many who are not—to consider that issue when we go into the Lobbies tonight.

Finally, I will say one word on the question whether amendment (b) and the Bill proposed by the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) is some kind of constitutional outrage. The Father of the House spoke about it, as did my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), and I will add a word.

It is a fine thing to debate constitutional process but, if one is going to do so, it is important to read the books. It is important to know what our constitution is. There is one pre-eminent authority on the law of our constitution, and the one thing that A. V. Dicey makes clearer than anything else in his very large book is that the House of Commons has undisputed control of its own procedures. The Standing Orders of the House of Commons, which Bagehot tells us are the nearest thing in this terrible constitutional melee to a constitution in our country, are under the control of this House. There is nothing improper, wrong or even unusual about changing Standing Orders by a majority of this House of Commons. Until 1906, the Government did not have control of the Order Paper. It was invented for a particular reason that the Government should have that control, but there is no need for them to have it in future.

Mr Speaker

Order. After the next speaker, the time limit will have to be reduced to three minutes, because everybody has been taking interventions, which is very consistent with the rules of debate but, obviously, truncates the opportunities of other right hon. and hon. Members.

17:50:00

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC)

I am proud that my name is on amendments (o), (g), (b) and (j). We also support amendments (a) and (i), but not amendment (n). That is because the Brexiteers' modest proposal to the problem of Ireland is Swiftian in its grotesquery, its historical ignorance and its single, 360°, all-encompassing blind spot.

In June 2016, the Prime Minister, in a last-ditch attempt to win the referendum, explained how customs checks between Northern Ireland and Ireland would be inevitable if we were pulled out of the EU. What followed was a series of warnings from customs experts, culminating in Eric Pickett, an authority in WTO rules and international law, telling MPs in February 2017 that giving Ireland special treatment would be a strict violation of WTO law. When Mrs May triggered article 50 a mere month later, with the help of the Labour party, she started the clock on Brexit without having the faintest idea how she might avoid running roughshod over the Good Friday agreement. Now, two years later, we are still debating whether or not we need a backstop designed to avoid the dangerous chaos of a hard border. All the while, the clock is ticking and this place cannot find a resolution, and all the while the Prime Minister's status is sinking before our eyes. Will she take the peoples of the UK down with her? Or will she put all four nations before unforgivable party loyalty and turn to us for answers?

There are plenty of answers the Prime Minister could choose on today's Order Paper. Not all of them perfect—some of them attempt to have cake and eat it—but some of them are necessary and rational compromises. They are necessary to avoid the no-deal-by-default scenario towards which we accelerate with every passing day. The Labour party's indifference makes it just as culpable. Last night's last-minute one-line Whip against the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill is illustrative of the Labour party's intentional apathy towards all things Brexit. The amendment tabled by the Opposition Front-Bench team today is a masterclass in fence-sitting. Let me be clear: their self-serving ambiguity is paving the way to a no deal.

Brexit is a thinly veiled assumption by the British Government of their right to centralise power and concentrate wealth. I am not talking about taking back control and money from the EU; I am talking about using Brexit as an excuse to take powers back from Wales and spend ever more per head in London than in Wales than they currently do. The economic disparity between Wales and London is already the worst in the European Union. It is not possible to overstate the grotesqueness of our current inequality. Inner London's GDP is 614% of the EU average, while West Wales and the Valleys, where I live, possesses a regional GDP of 68% of the same EU average. Westminster has always seen fit to benefit most that which is closest to its heart, and its heart is in south-east England. As for the rest of us, we are as we always have been—peripheral, expendable, beyond the pale.

This place indulges itself with endless, abstract angels-on-a-pinhead debates about backstops, safe in the knowledge that most of us here will probably be all right in a no-deal scenario. I was in Holyhead yesterday, with the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies). What we were told by people in the port of Holyhead is that they probably can survive day one of no deal, but they have no idea what is happening in the weeks after that—they have no idea whatsoever. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is going there this week to deal with pets and racehorses; the grand national is a week after we come out and most of the horses come through Holyhead. We will be all right here in a no-deal scenario; it is real people, constituents of mine and of all hon. Members—the hill farmers, the factory workers, the mums and dads; and, ultimately, the children—who will pay the real price for our time-wasting. I beg the Prime Minister: let us move on, rule out no deal, and allow the House to work, at least for once, for the people and not for her party.

Mr Speaker

A three-minute limit now applies on each Back-Bench speech.

17:54:00

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con)

With two months to go until 29 March, it is hardly surprising that we are once again debating our withdrawal from the European Union. It is pretty obvious that we should be much further ahead in the process. Of course, the warning signs have been there for months, as all Members have said: from the minute the backstop went down to the Chequers agreement and the withdrawal agreement, which were of course not right for our country. I voted against the withdrawal agreement.

At this crucial time, we need leadership, which is why I welcome the Prime Minister's very clear statement today. She should be commended for the way she handled strong questioning and rightly addressed many of the challenges relating to the withdrawal agreement. She should be particularly commended for reopening the negotiations on the withdrawal agreement. I would like to hear more from the Government about whether they have engaged in discussions and are preparing to hear from the European Commission whether it is prepared, willing and able to reopen the negotiations and get that legally binding change to the withdrawal agreement.

It is right that we now concentrate all efforts on delivering the referendum mandate. We cannot have more statements or glorified letters of assurances; we must get that clear, legally binding change to the text of the withdrawal agreement. When the negotiations are reopened, we need to ensure that the right people are engaged and involved in the process.

Ian Paisley

Does the right hon. Lady agree that yes, obviously, a legal textual change is now being sought, but that should not come as any surprise because the words of amendment (n) are already in paragraph 27 of the political agreement, of which Europe has been aware since November last year?

Priti Patel

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, which is why there is now an opportunity for us to land a clear commitment on the future relationship and on every aspect of the trading relationship, and to remove some of the ambiguity in the political declaration.

It is important to recognise—as I think all Members do—that Parliament must deliver on the referendum mandate, and we have the opportunity to do so. The Prime Minister was right to refer to Conservative colleagues who were on either side of the referendum argument but have put forward new proposals that seek to provide certainty and clarity. They seek to unite the country in getting that compromise, including by extending the key issues around implementation, replacing the backstop and supporting the future UK-EU free trade arrangement, as well as by seeking co-operation in security matters and guaranteeing citizens' rights going forward.

I was reassured by the Prime Minister's remarks today, which is why her hand should be strengthened when she goes back to Brussels. I have called for the Government to go back to Brussels again and again since I voted against the withdrawal agreement. We must leave on 29 March so that we can position ourselves as an outward-looking, global, free-trading country, and as a nation that is on that mission of economic and democratic renewal. I will support amendment (n). We have to find the right degree of unity and compromise to strengthen the Government and the Prime Minister to go, as she herself stated today, back to Brussels to deliver for Britain.

17:58:00

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab)

The right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) is passionate about the Land Rover plant in her constituency, as I am passionate about the Jaguar plant in Erdington. The plants have transformed the lives of tens of thousands throughout Birmingham and the west midlands. Together, the two plants are a symbol of the success of the automotive industry. But we have lost a thousand jobs at the Jag over the past 12 months, and we recently saw the announcement of 4,500 job losses. That is why the chief executive of JLR, Ralf Speth, said no to no deal. With the greatest of respect, some right hon. Members on the Government Benches should show a degree of humility. There are some who pretend that they know more about cars than the people who make cars, more about building ships than the people who build ships, and more about keeping our country safe than the head of counter-terrorism.

During the next stage, we have a duty to honour the outcome of the referendum and to do everything possible to reach agreement, but it is clear beyond any doubt that the deal on offer will not pass, and that no serious progress is being made towards delivering a deal that will defend the national interests and also pass Parliament. Therefore, in saying no to no deal, the right hon. Member for Meriden and I hope that the Government listen. Everything possible in terms of cross-party negotiations needs to be done to reach an agreement, but, crucially, that needs to be underpinned by the amendment from my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), which would prevent us going over the cliff on 29 March if the Government refuse to listen.

The Government cannot be allowed to treat the House of Commons with contempt or to ignore the views of its Members. Going into a serious negotiation, we have to move beyond the Tory party talking to itself. We must do right by the country. It should no longer be, “My deal or no deal”, and no longer should we be taken ever closer to the cliff. All this matters for the security of our country, for medicines, for industry, for farming, for food, and for retail. The voices are loud and clear and they need to be listened to.

In conclusion, I am someone of an Irish background, but I am also someone who believes in a proud United Kingdom. This is a great country with great potential. I do not want us to become a fearful, fractured, inward-turning country at the margins of Europe—a country that is weakened in the world and impoverished for a generation. Our destiny is to be a truly great Britain—not a country plunging over the abyss into decades of despair, which is what will happen if we go out on 29 March without a deal.

18:01:00

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con)

I have followed three principles since the country voted to leave the European Union: to respect the referendum result and deliver Brexit; not to have a second referendum; and to avoid no deal. I voted to implement article 50. I supported the withdrawal agreement out of my own free will with no offers of gongs or jobs. Members can imagine therefore that I have taken with a pinch of salt the protestations—the butter-would-not-melt-in-my-mouth protestations—of the hard Brexiteers as they wish the Prime Minister well, with a heavy heart, as they send her back to Brussels, assuring her of their good will.

I will continue to support the Prime Minister: I supported her when the hard Brexiteers tried to oust her as Prime Minister; I supported her in the no-confidence vote; and tonight in the Lobby I will support her. I will vote for the Grieve amendment. The Prime Minister says that it is time for Parliament to say what it wants, not what it does not want. This is what the Grieve amendment does, and it is a modest constitutional proposal. I do not support the ERG in its proposal to prorogue—the first such prorogation of Parliament since Charles I—or in its instruction to Her Majesty not to pass Parliament's legislation. I support merely a modest amendment that supports the Prime Minister.

I support the Spelman amendment, because I do not want no deal. The Prime Minister has said from the Dispatch Box that she wants to avoid no deal. I back the Prime Minister and I back Spelman. I support the Cooper amendment because the Prime Minister needs time to get her deal right, because I know that the hard Brexiteers will vote her down on 14 February, so she needs the time to get things right. I back Cooper and I back Boles. I am afraid, however, that, because I support the Prime Minister I cannot support the Brady amendment. I back the Prime Minister's withdrawal agreement and, unlike some people in this House, I will not turn my back on it and neuter it with a fake clause, pretending that it is amending an agreement when it is doing no such thing.

I wish the Prime Minister well in the full knowledge that Parliament can come forward and actually say what it wants to do. Our bluff can be called and we can come forward with our own proposals. I back her in her withdrawal agreement and I back her in avoiding no deal. I am pleased and delighted to remain a loyal supporter of the Prime and her policy on Brexit.

18:04:00

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab)

It was embarrassing to be part of the pantomime that started this debate earlier and that could not contrast more with the levels of anxiety that I hear out there in the country whenever I am allowed to go home. These debates have largely generated far more heat than light, and I have been glad to hear many Members, in the debate that has ensued, recognise that we are breaking our democracy. We urgently have to build common ground. That is why amendment (f) in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), which seeks to narrow down the options with a series of indicative votes, is an incredibly helpful suggestion. So too is amendment (h) in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), along with myself and many others, proposing a citizens' assembly. This has been used as a mechanism in many other countries, including Ireland, to break similarly controversial deadlocks.

The importance of amendment (h) is that the 46 MPs who are signatory to it come from all different Brexit positions and none. That proves that there are a number of us in this House who are willing to step out of the trenches and start to compromise. This matters because HOPE not hate produced a report today that clearly shows that attitudes around the country are hardening and people's willingness to compromise is being reduced. We are seeing fear, anger and a rise in activity from the far right in that fertile ground in a way that I have not seen since I was growing up as a child in the 1980s.

It is astonishing that the Prime Minister came here today still talking to the House as if she can have it both ways. She told my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) that she is seeking to strengthen workers' rights, but then she told this House that she is backing the Baker plan, which on page 31 junks the non-regression clause and seeks to dilute existing employment rights protections. The Prime Minister seems determined to tilt right and try to get this through with a small group of hard Brexiteers in her own party, but how does she honestly think that she is going

to maintain that fragile coalition all the way through the legislation that will be required to pass this?

That is why, reluctantly, I have come to the conclusion that today I will support amendment (b) in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). That is not because I think that extending article 50 to the end of the year is by any means sustainable; it is not and the public will not accept it. They will not forgive us if we go over the summer and try to re-elect MEPs to a Parliament that we were supposed to have left three months before.

There is not enough understanding in this House of how little trust there is that we mean what we say when we say we respect the result of the referendum, and we cannot afford to kick the can down the road any longer. But this amendment is now the only mechanism that this House has to try to avoid a no-deal scenario, and to start making real decisions about how we are going to respect the result of the referendum, protect jobs and heal this divided country.

Mr Speaker

Oh! Well, I would have called a particular hon. Gentleman who seems to have beetled out of the Chamber. That is most unfortunate. I hope the fellow is not indisposed. But Mr Charles Walker is here, and that is important.

18:07:00

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con)

I have an admission to make: I am not an intellectual. [Hon. Members: “No!”] No, I am not. I really have tried it for the past few months, but I just cannot get on with it, so I am not going to give a highbrow, intellectual speech. My speech will be more of a three-minute cry of frustration, because I really, really do want to leave the EU; I have campaigned for it for a number of years and I am very keen to go.

We have talked at length about unicorns, and the proudest stallion unicorn of all is the unicorn of perfection—a unicorn that canters across broken fields with unrealisable dreams underfoot. But the unicorn of perfection must sadly be slayed, because perfection does not exist. When I am out in my constituency, meeting people who do not email me and do not write to me, so they are not self-selecting, they say three things to me: “Get on. Get on. Get on.” These people voted leave. These people voted remain. But they want to get on and they want this Parliament to make a decision. They have accepted the result of the referendum.

It will be impossible for this House to come up with a perfect deal—a bowl of porridge that everyone finds to their satisfaction. But we can find something that 80% of our fair-minded constituents can get behind and say, “Do you know what? As a fair-minded citizen of this country, I’d have liked a little more of that and a little less of this, but I can live with it. I can get on and move on, and we can have certainty.” It is impossible for this House to appeal to the implacable 10% who bookend the 80%—the remainers who want to remain at any cost and the leavers who want to leave at any cost. The demands of these people cannot be met by this House.

That is why tonight I will be supporting the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady). I will go through that Division Lobby to hopefully give the Prime Minister further instruction to go back to the EU and deliver a deal that 80% of my country and my constituents can unite behind.

18:10:00

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

We have 59 days to go, or, as James Melville said on Twitter a little earlier, 28 parliamentary sitting days to go.

Last time I spoke on this, as you probably remember, Mr Speaker, I mentioned Fintan O'Toole's book, "Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain", and the pain we are all feeling at the moment. The quote I used then was the Turkish proverb,

"An Englishman will burn his bed to catch a flea."

It is worth reflecting a bit more on what Brexit has done. The methodology of Brexit, Fintan O'Toole points out in the book, is this:

"It will triumph by teaching the English to take trivial things—the petty annoyances of regulation—very seriously indeed, and to regard the serious things—jobs, communities, lives—with sincere and studied triviality."

That is what we are seeing in the middle of this Brexit nonsense. All options of Brexit are bad. The Prime Minister knows this. In a sleight of hand today, she alluded to it by talking of the balance between the referendum and the economics. But of course, if we look at the economics alone, this is a bad deal.

The Government have got themselves into the invidious position of making promises to Ireland and making promises to other people that they would be outside the customs union and the single market and still have frictionless trade. I am talking of unicorns and made-up fantasies. They then had an opponent at a negotiation saying, "This is nonsense. Give us some assurance, have a backstop", and the backstop came along. Now this House is saying, "See that backstop, that assurance we gave on the fantasies we were talking about—we now want you to negotiate away our assurance and our fantasies." Westminster has got to take a step back and see the nonsense it is finding itself in.

Amendment (q) was not selected today, but I would encourage people in future to join the queue. It is an amendment to revoke article 50, tabled in my name and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). This is something the UK has control of until 29 March. The UK can get itself out of the hole it has dug for itself through the fantasies that Mr O'Toole expanded on greatly in his book. A lot could be done to prevent the damage that is coming down the road. If we leave on 29 March or in December 2020, MPs here, particularly whoever is in the governing party, will have to face that. Maybe this is one of the reasons Labour does not want a general election. Who wants to be the Government on 29 March or in December 2020 when you leave and you have queues in Dover, you are damaging the economy, and you have empty shelves? Whoever is holding the parcel when that music stops is going to find themselves in great trouble.

Ian Paisley

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the genius in any negotiation is to achieve an agreement, and that agreement implies that two sides have come to a common cause? Is not the fatal flaw of what Europe has done that it has not accepted that Britain cannot agree with this?

Angus Brendan MacNeil

No. The agreement was reached. This is the funny thing. The agreement was reached, and now the Prime Minister, having not talked to the House of Commons, comes back to the House of Commons and finds that it thinks that her agreement is a dud agreement. She has now been sent to scurry back to Europe to beg the Europeans because the shire Tories want something different. They had an agreement but then they were scared of the agreement and sent the Prime Minister to go and get another one. In the beginning, we did not want any parliamentary involvement at all. Conservative parliamentarians, in particular, were abdicating their responsibility as MPs and hiving this off to the Government. Then when the Government came back, it was not good enough, deepening the mess of Brexit. This is exactly the problem we have here today.

We should take a further step and consider this idea that going out of the customs union and the single market is bad for you. There are about 12 customs unions across the world between about 100 countries. The exceptionalism about the UK is utterly baffling, and it is so baffling because these people are trying to damage their communities and their businesses. It does not matter how often we say it, but this is the point of Brexit. This is what Brexit is going to end up with—damage to jobs and damage to business. Airbus and other companies are dismissed because, as Fintan O'Toole said, the serious things are regarded with “studied triviality”. I am at the end of my tether trying to talk to these guys. This is why Scotland is moving on. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) said, we are moving towards independence—we have to. This is a mess.

18:14:00

Nick Boles (Grantham and Stamford) (Con)

In the short time available to me, I will not try to match my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), who said almost everything that I would have said and much more entertainingly. I will try to explain why I have taken a step that many of my hon. Friends consider to be somewhat rash—the step of signing the amendment tabled by the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and supporting the Bill promoted by her.

The reason I have done so is that on the morning after the referendum, I sent a message to my constituents in which I committed to do my best to make a success of Brexit. Since then, I have left hospital in a wheelchair to vote for triggering article 50, and I have voted with the Government in every single Division on the withdrawal Act and every other piece of legislation advancing the delivery of a successful Brexit—unlike, I would point out, 117 of my fellow members of the Conservative party, including all the members of the ERG.

I am seriously committed to making a success of Brexit, but there are two parts to that sentence. There is Brexit and there is success, and Brexit on 29 March with no deal will not be a success. It will be a disaster. It will sour the British people against the operation of their Government for a generation, and I cannot have that on my conscience.

I will tell the House what the proposed amendment and Bill would do. They would rule out a no-deal Brexit on 29 March. They do not rule out a no-deal Brexit forever, because the only way of doing that is to revoke Brexit. I will never vote for that, and the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford will never vote for that. I do not believe that more than 100 Members of this House will ever vote to revoke Brexit, because that would be a political disaster at least as cataclysmic as the economic and human disaster of a no-deal Brexit on 29 March.

What we seek is to buy ourselves a little time to find a compromise and make a success of Brexit. I hope that we will be successful with this amendment tonight, but if we are not, it will be because

the Prime Minister made a pledge at the Dispatch Box to come back to the House on 14 February with a motion that is equivalent to this one and equally amendable. My hon. Friends and I from across the House will move an equivalent amendment again, with an equivalent Bill attached, and I hope that Members will support them.

18:17:00

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab)

The Prime Minister is asking the House to back an amendment to a deal that she said could not be amended, to give her a mandate to negotiate with the EU that she said she never needed, and to reopen a withdrawal agreement that she insisted could not be reopened. I do not know whether the Prime Minister genuinely believes that she can get the EU to reopen negotiations despite the fact that it has said it will not; whether she has finally succumbed to the ERG's myth that she just has to somehow stand up to the EU and it will give us all the benefits of membership with none of the responsibilities; or whether she knows that this is all a charade and is in fact continuing her plan to run down the clock and blackmail MPs into backing her bad deal, because leaving the EU with no deal is even worse.

What I do know is that we are in a complete and utter mess. Many Members of this House know that, and members of the public know it too. The mess has been caused by a lack of honesty about the choices that Brexit inevitably brings. Brexit has always been a choice between staying as close to the EU as possible, to protect jobs and prevent a border in Ireland, giving up our say over the rules and getting some kind of free trade agreement, which will inevitably mean more barriers to trade than being a member and seeing a border on the island of Ireland, or leaving the EU with no deal at all, with all the risks and uncertainty that that brings for jobs, businesses and the Good Friday agreement.

If the Prime Minister and the Government will not take the lead in facing up to these choices and being honest with Members of this House and the public, then Parliament must, and the first step has to be to rule out no deal. Many hon. Members have spoken about the risks of this, but I would just say that for many Members from the east midlands—Members such as me from Leicester—the threats to food and drink manufacturing are real. Some 46,000 jobs depend on food and drink manufacturing, and we know that there could be serious disruption to food supplies and rising business costs and consumer prices if there is no deal.

I will vote for all amendments that seek to rule out no deal, but I believe the most important of these is amendment (b) in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). It is the only one that will lead to legislation that requires the Prime Minister to request an extension of article 50, rather than simply urging her to do that through a motion of this House. As my right hon. Friend has said, the House can amend her Bill to specify how long the extension should be. My view, however, is that any extension must be for a purpose, and that purpose is being honest and straight with the public about the real choices we face in our long-term relationship with the EU. I urge Members to back that amendment tonight.

18:20:00

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con)

It may be a bit of cliché now, but I say to the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) that the best way to prevent no deal is to vote for a deal. [Interruption.] Well, I am afraid it is pretty obvious.

We have heard so much in this debate about compromise, and we have all had to compromise. This is where I agree with my right hon. Friends the Members for Ashford (Damian Green) and for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin). We come to this debate from different directions—I voted leave in the referendum, and we only won by 52% to 48%—and we cannot get a deal for ourselves that gives us 100% of what we want, so we have to settle for most of what we want.

Frankly, what the Prime Minister has provided us with is leaving the EU, getting control of migration and, after a process of perhaps two or three years, getting out of the customs union. I am not a hard Brexiteer or a soft Brexiteer, but a measured Brexiteer, and that is what the Prime Minister is trying to do. We cannot of course have government by a sub-committee of the 1922 committee. We cannot keep kicking this can down the lane, as we have been told again and again. We have to come to a decision, and probably within the next two weeks we will have to make that final decision.

I say to the Government that I, like so many of my colleagues, will be supporting amendment (n). We want to give the Government some negotiating push to try to resolve this, but we have heard again and again that the EU will not contemplate any amendment to the withdrawal agreement. I say—and I repeat—that there is a solution to this, and we may have to do this in the end if we are going to get this deal through Parliament and reassure in particular our colleagues from Northern Ireland: we may have to issue a letter of reservation, under the Vienna convention, to the treaty. It would say that as both parties agree that the backstop is temporary, if it proves not to be temporary but subsists after 2021, we reserve the right under the Vienna convention to end the backstop and get out of it.

The EU could of course refuse to ratify the treaty, but we do not have to issue the letter of reservation at the time. I believe, however, that if we make absolutely clear our intention that the backstop should be temporary—that is what we have all agreed: the EU has agreed, the DUP has agreed, the Conservative party has agreed, the Labour party has agreed—and we are all agreed, this problem is surmountable. However, the Government must now take action.

I just make one final plea. We talk so much about compromise. At the end of the day, although the Prime Minister is accused of running down the clock, she is doing her level best to deliver what the British people want. So let us finally support her, and let us push this deal over the line.

18:23:00

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green)

I rise to speak in favour of amendment (g) and to make the case that the amendment is vital in enabling Parliament to take control, frankly, from a Government who are in denial and in disarray. I must say that I find any opposition to amendment (g) from Conservative Members quite perplexing, given that so many of them were in the forefront of saying that Brexit was all about restoring parliamentary sovereignty. Now it seems as though they regard parliamentary sovereignty as a bit of an inconvenient obstacle to getting their own way.

The amendment is vital to allowing us to avoid the catastrophe of no deal. Let me make it very clear that for my constituents in Brighton no deal would be a catastrophe—a catastrophe for our tourism industry, for businesses, for our universities and research, and for families and communities who are built on free movement, and will fight to the end to stop free movement ending. The amendment does not bind the House to any particular outcome; it simply gives Parliament the time and space to make an honest assessment of the available options.

I want to say a few words about amendment (n)—the so-called Brady amendment. It takes fantasy to a new art form. I do not know how many times the EU has to say that it is just not possible to re-open negotiation on the withdrawal Bill. The amendment is perhaps an extraordinary way of trying to get the Conservative party to hold together, but it will not stand up to any kind of contact with external reality. Right now, EU officials tell us that they are preparing a statement that says that it would not be possible to open up an agreement that was negotiated over the past 20 months. Sabine Weyand, the deputy chief negotiator, said yesterday:

“There’s no negotiation between the UK and EU—that’s finished.”

Crossing one’s fingers, screwing up one’s eyes and just wishing it was otherwise is not a good negotiating strategy.

I appeal to Conservative colleagues to focus on what is in front of us—on practical ways to avoid the catastrophe of no deal, which will hurt the poorest hardest, and for which the Prime Minister has absolutely no mandate. To those Conservative Members who seem to think that threatening no deal is effective with our European counterparts, I point out that it is tantamount to someone standing with a pistol to their head and saying, “I’ll fire it if they don’t do what I want.” It is not a very sensible negotiating strategy.

In my last few words, I want to say how much I support amendment (h) on having a citizens’ assembly. If I had more time, I would say more about it.

Mr Speaker

We rue the absence of that further time.

18:27:00

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con)

It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas). I again give this caution: we do not seem to be listening in this House. If we continue to say, “This is a Conservative party problem,” we fundamentally misunderstand why people voted for Brexit. We can go on and on about the machinations of the Conservative party, and about the party being united, but people in this country, in working-class areas, voted in swathes for Brexit. What were they voting for? I tell the House now that it was not stuff to do with the Conservative party.

We are limited in our options. I was particularly touched by the speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin). I understand—I can kind of feel—his trepidation about no deal, and absolutely share it; but we cannot get rid of no deal by taking that option away, because without that, we have nothing to fall back on. Should we have done this at the beginning? Yes. Should we have bound Opposition parties into this, and have made this an endeavour of national renewal? Of course we should, but we are where we are, and we cannot capitulate and let the United Kingdom fall out on a deal that is not good enough.

We have one option left, and that, I am afraid, is to support the Brady amendment. Many of us in this place have said that the Northern Ireland backstop is the problem, so we must now do what the EU keeps saying we cannot do: get behind the Prime Minister and show that we are united on that front. Let us get a result on that backstop agreement—something: a sunset clause, or some sort of unilateral exit—and then let us get on and deliver it. Let us get into the realm of possibility.

I see the “exciting” new proposals that came forward today; I am pretty lukewarm about them, to be honest, because this has been going on for two years. We have a deal, but there are aspects of it that are not good enough. Let us tackle those aspects, focus on what we are doing, and actually deliver Brexit. Let us get this done, so that we can get out of the European Union on 29 March and get on with something else. I have sat through the debate, and it has been extraordinarily painful to hear the arguments rehashed again and again. I have huge respect for those who continue to say, “This or that is going to happen,” and “This or that is what I want,” but we are here now; we are starting now. The agreement has a fundamental flaw that we cannot accept, but let us get on and do something about the backstop that is within the realms of what we can do. If we ask for too much—for the unreasonable—the European Union will shut the door. Let us ask for something deliverable, get that backstop amended, and get out the European Union.

18:30:00

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

There has been much talk today about finding consensus across the House. The consensus that should trouble us all is the consensus between the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) and my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) when they talk about the contempt the British public have for the process they are seeing unfolding before their eyes: the pantomime that we are becoming in Parliament, the questions they have about what on earth is going on in this place, and the plague on all our houses that they see.

I have gone through all the amendments and tonight I will support the amendments in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) and the Labour Front Bench to try to make some progress. The honest truth, however, is that we have heard many powerful speeches today and there will be little progress.

In the short time available to me I want to talk about amendment (h). It was not selected, but it speaks to Einstein’s principle that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. We are living through that in this place as we talk but do not listen to each other.

Citizens’ assemblies are not about replacing MPs, or about cancelling or giving up on Parliament. They are not about saying parliamentary democracy cannot work; they are about making it work with the public. They are also about stopping the games that we have seen being played in this place: the horse trading and the unicorn hunting that has meant that we are in this gridlock. Parliaments around the world have used citizens’ assemblies as a circuit breaker to all the bad habits that now inhabit this place. Everybody here claims to know the will of the people on these issues when the truth is that nobody does, because nobody has actually asked them. It is 250 people randomly selected to represent the British people: not the “Question Time” audience or those who will bother to turn up, but people sorted by their age, ethnicity, gender and social class, excluding politicians and those who work for them. Not aye or no, but looking at the priorities and feeding back into our discussions. We would be free as a Parliament to say no to what they said, but after just 10 short weeks of deliberation we never know what a pair of fresh eyes might bring to this debate. Certainly, that has been the experience in Ireland, Iceland, Canada and Australia. It would equally have leave and remain, Norway, Canada and any other flavour of Brexit.

The Prime Minister was right when she said that nothing has changed, but it can get worse. I ask Members whether they truly think progress can be made in the next 10 weeks, or whether it might

just be worth looking at whether there is a better way that we can learn from. The public are watching. They need us to do better. Let us give it a shot.

18:33:00

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con)

As colleagues will know, I voted against my party for the first time in my career when I could not support the Prime Minister and the Cabinet's withdrawal agreement. I felt it breached two very important manifesto commitments, largely around the Northern Ireland protocol, putting barriers in the way of different parts of the United Kingdom and potentially trapping us in an indefinite customs union.

I want to give the Prime Minister the best opportunity to go back to the European Union and secure the changes that are necessary. In my judgment, supporting the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady) provides the best opportunity to support the Prime Minister in her return to the European Union.

I do not want to make her task more difficult. That is why I think it is fundamentally wrong to rule out a no-deal Brexit. The best way to secure a Brexit with a deal is to get a deal before this House that can get its support. My right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) said she thought there was some merit in ruling out a no deal to get something in return. The problem is that if this House rules out a no-deal Brexit without the Prime Minister getting something in return, that makes her life more difficult. It makes it more difficult for her to secure a deal and less likely that we will get the deal we need to rule out a no-deal Brexit.

The amendment in the name of the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) is flawed for that reason. We have already established that her Bill has a number of problems. I understand that the Labour Front-Bench team is not keen on the length of the delay; her Bill says it would be nine months. I asked her a question and established that the Bill could be used—I accept not by her or my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), but by others—as a mechanism for cancelling Brexit, against the wishes of the public. The Bill needs more scrutiny than the one day in which it would be rammed through this House.

I say to my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) that it is perfectly proper for the House to look at its procedures, but if it decides to ram through a piece of contested legislation that has not been agreed to in a procedure usually used for emergency legislation agreed by both Front-Bench teams, I think Back Benchers will rue that precedent, because a future Government will use it to ram through legislation without proper scrutiny. I urge the House to reject amendment (b).

18:36:00

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP)

I rise to support the SNP amendment that seeks an extension to article 50, and to oppose the amendment in the name of the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady). The most pertinent point that has been made this afternoon in relation to what is being called the Brady amendment is that the backstop is the inevitable consequence of a clash between the Prime Minister's red lines and our obligations under the Good Friday agreement. Therefore, as the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) said, the Brady amendment is the sort of displacement activity that is engaged in by children who are asked to do something that they do not want to do. I make no apology for repeating that analogy, because it was fantastic.

As I have been sitting here this afternoon listening to Conservative Members waxing lyrical about the Brady amendment, The Guardian correspondent in Brussels and other respected correspondents have reported that the European Union is preparing to issue an immediate rebuttal and publish a statement rejecting any renegotiation of the withdrawal agreement in the event of amendment (n) being passed. Tony Connelly, the very well respected RTE journalist, tells us that Jean-Claude Juncker phoned the Prime Minister at lunch time today to tell her that the Brady amendment is pointless. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker

Order. There are a lot of noisy conversations taking place. The hon. and learned Lady must be heard.

Joanna Cherry

I am sure they do not want to hear it, because it is not convenient. What we have been engaged in today is another waste of time. It is a charade and, frankly, a joke.

Last Friday was the birthday of Robert Burns, who famously said,

“Oh wad some power the giftie gie us

To see ourselves as ithers see us!”

Today, the UK Government and this Parliament are seen as the laughing stock of Europe. A BBC correspondent on the radio this morning said that the other member states are getting the popcorn out, mesmerised by what is going on in this House.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP)

Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that, as well as being pointless because it will never be agreed, tinkering with the backstop is potentially dangerous? If we gave the backstop its correct description—the Good Friday peace agreement guarantee—tinkering with it would be seen to be as reckless as it actually is.

Joanna Cherry

I entirely agree. I ask myself the following question: what kind of a Prime Minister spends months—years—negotiating a deal, and then supports someone else’s amendment, which drives a coach and horses through it, as the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) said? We are in this mess because of the Prime Minister’s red lines and the Conservative and Unionist party’s deceit and foolishness.

Another famous Scottish writer—Walter Scott—once wrote:

“Oh, what a tangled web we weave

When first we practise to deceive!”

There has been constant deception. First, there was David Cameron’s deception when he called his referendum and thought he could win it with the sort of scare tactics that were employed in Scotland during the independence referendum; then there was the deception employed by the leave campaign, the lies and the undeliverable promises made to ordinary decent people in this country;

and now there is the deception of the Prime Minister pretending, so she can hang on to power for a few more days or weeks, that the Brady amendment is her saviour.

The delay provided for in the amendments that seek an extension is not the answer to the mess we are in. The answer for the United Kingdom is a second EU referendum, and the answer for Scotland is a second independence referendum. I believe that very soon Scotland will have to decide whether Scotland wants to be an unequal member of this Union or an equal member of the European Union—a member of a market of 60 million or a member of a single market of 500 million. The answer is a bit of a no-brainer.

18:40:00

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab)

I have only 10 minutes, so I will get to the heart of the matter. Last Monday, the Prime Minister should have made a substantive and detailed statement setting out how the Government planned to proceed in the face of defeat—a plan B—but she did not. Instead, she has today taken a radically different course and indicated support for an amendment that cuts across the very deal she negotiated by requiring the backstop to be replaced with unspecified “alternative arrangements”. She said earlier it was not the first time the phrase had been used. It has been used twice in these negotiations in different ways: first to mean the future relationship itself and secondly to mean technology. It cannot mean the future relationship, because if we have a future relationship, we do not need a backstop; and if it means technology, it takes us back to the old idea of technology that is not there.

It is one thing for Back Benchers to lay an amendment at odds with the Prime Minister’s deal, but it is quite another for the Prime Minister to support it, unless she has already got an indication from the EU that it could and would negotiate the necessary changes—but she has not. The danger is obvious: that the Prime Minister today may build a temporary sense of unity on her own Benches while in reality raising expectations she can never fulfil.

On 14 January, on the eve of the meaningful vote, the Prime Minister said at that Dispatch Box:

“I recognise that some Members wanted to see changes to the withdrawal agreement, a unilateral exit mechanism from the backstop, an end date or rejecting the backstop altogether... The simple truth is that the EU was not prepared to agree to this and rejecting the backstop altogether means no deal.”—[Official Report, 14 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 826.]

Either that was correct, in which case the Government backing this amendment is absurd, or it was not, which raises its own equally serious issues. Earlier when confronted with this, the Prime Minister said you never know if you do not try, which is true, but we have been here before. She told us on 10 December that she was off to seek much lesser concessions, and she failed, so if we are going down the path of giving it try, we need to consider what happens if we try and fail.

I listened carefully to the Prime Minister when she was challenged by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), and she refused to rule out the prospect that she herself would apply for an extension of article 50 if this latest attempt to reopen issues, long thought closed, failed. I do not think this House should be so passive in the face of the high likelihood that we will be back here in two weeks facing that very prospect, which is why Labour will support the amendment seeking to prevent no deal, whether by an extension of article 50 or otherwise.

No deal would be catastrophic for jobs and living standards, it would weaken our security, and it would risk a hard border in Northern Ireland. Members should be under no illusion about this: no deal is not a way to prevent a hard border, but a way to guarantee it.

Mr Nigel Evans

Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer

I will in a moment.

The first step in preventing the rush to no deal is to reduce the time pressure on the article 50 process. That is what some of the key amendments seek to do, and we will support them, but before there are cries of “Brexit delayed”, let us be clear: we are only at this stage, with 59 days to go, because the Government have run down the clock.

The word crisis is overused in this House, in our media and in our national debate, but we should be in no doubt that this is one of the greatest national crises our country has faced in a generation, and in the absence of leadership from the Government and this Prime Minister, Parliament must now act.

I recognise that there are concerns among some Members, including some on my own side, about voting for these amendments tonight, and I understand those concerns. I also understand the anger and frustration felt by many of our constituents about the handling of these negotiations, and about the way in which this place has conducted itself in recent weeks.

Mr Evans

rose—

Keir Starmer

However, we do not have the luxury of being bystanders in this debate. We are active participants. What our constituents are looking for is leadership, and it is time for us to provide it. We cannot say that we want to prevent no deal if we are not willing to take steps to stop it. We cannot tell the people that we do not want no deal and then sleepwalk towards it. We must act, and we must act tonight. Our constituents will not forgive us—nor should they—if we dodge difficult questions.

Mr Evans

rose—

Keir Starmer

The Prime Minister may pretend otherwise, but I want to be very clear: delay of article 50 is now inevitable, and it is irresponsible to pretend otherwise. That is the honest truth, and our constituents need to be told it. Even if the Prime Minister were to get a deal through the House in the coming weeks, a swathe of legislation would still need to be passed: six Bills, including a complex implementation Bill, and 600 statutory instruments. It is simply not credible to pretend that all that could be forced through in the remaining time. All that the amendments do is face reality.

Mr Evans

Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer

I will not, because I do not want to leave the Secretary of State without the time that he needs.

The next task that the House will have to undertake is to explore credible alternatives to the Prime Minister's deal that might be capable of gaining majority support in the House. That is not an easy task, but it is one that we need to get on with. Time is now needed in which to debate and vote on these options. That is why Labour's Front-Bench amendment was tabled, and it is also why Labour supports amendment (g), in the name of the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), and amendment (f), in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn).

One of the great tragedies of this last two years is that we have had a Prime Minister who is unwilling to listen to Parliament and wants to push Parliament away, unwilling to build consensus, and unwilling to listen to reasonable amendments. But the Prime Minister is now out of time, and Parliament must take control.

18:47:00

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

Recent weeks have proved the strength and vigour of Parliament, but it is now time to agree its will. It is time for us to establish what deal the House is for, to deliver certainty to our citizens and businesses, and to offer clarity to the European Union. As we debate inside the Chamber, we should not lose sight of the fact that outside, the EU rightly expects us to continue to respect our shared values: to protect citizens' rights, to honour our international obligations, and to preserve the integrity of the peace process and avoid a hard border. That is a commitment that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister holds extremely dear.

Indeed, many Members in all parts of the House find much in the withdrawal agreement that is common ground. That is an integral part of bringing the country back together as we move forward in the national interest. However, many of the amendments simply prolong uncertainty and delay, despite the paradox that they were presented in a spirit of making progress in the delivery of certainty.

Ms Angela Eagle

Will the Secretary of State give way?

Stephen Barclay

Unlike the shadow Secretary of State, I am happy to give way.

Ms Eagle

I thank the Secretary of State. I wonder whether he could enlighten the House about the phrase in the amendment tabled by the Chairman of the 1922 Committee, the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady). What are the "alternative arrangements" that they are going to barrel off to the EU to renegotiate in the next couple of weeks?

Stephen Barclay

If the hon. Lady had read the political declaration, she would know that the alternative arrangements are referred to in paragraph 19, but what she has drawn attention to is the stark difference between Labour and the Conservatives.

The amendment tabled by the Leader of the Opposition has barely been referred to today. Members on his own side did not even want to mention it as they referred to amendments tabled by Back Benchers. They did not seem to want to engage with it. That is because the Leader of the Opposition starts from a position of calling for unity, but cannot adopt the unified position of accepting an amendment from his own Back-Bench colleagues.

Mr Nigel Evans

Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Stephen Barclay

I will happily give way.

Mr Evans

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for showing such great generosity in allowing Members to intervene on him. If Members vote for the possibility of extending article 50 this evening by up to nine months and the EU allowed it, has he estimated how many billions of pounds that would cost, and could he estimate where that money would come from—which public services would be damaged because that money was going to Brussels rather than public services in the UK?

Stephen Barclay

The reason we are willing to take interventions and debate is that we have a clear position from the Prime Minister, whereas the position of the Leader of the Opposition is confused. Is he for a second referendum, like the shadow Business Secretary, or does he support the position of the shadow Education Secretary who thinks a second referendum would be a betrayal? Does he or does he not support the position of Len McCluskey, who is willing to engage with the Prime Minister?

Angus Brendan MacNeil

The question should be turned the other way: has any estimate been made of the billions in extra revenue that will come to the Exchequer through trading in the best single market and customs union for an extra nine months—not the fee to be part of the club, but the money that is to be gained from trade while being in that club?

Stephen Barclay

The whole point is that indecision and delay would flow from the amendment of the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), and indeed, as we saw in the debate, there is confusion as to what the date is: the amendment refers to the end of this year, yet in her remarks she said that it might not be that long; she said that it might be shorter. In an exchange, my very good friend my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) said that there would be further iterations where we could look at the timing, yet, as my distinguished predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab) pointed out, it is an empty vessel—in essence a Trojan horse in which there is indecision over delay.

Stephen Barclay

I want to make some progress. The key point that flows from the point made by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) is that by not backing a deal we prolong the level of uncertainty, and that drives cost. That is exactly why so many businesses in Scotland as well as the rest of the United Kingdom say that the best way to end unnecessary costs under a no deal is to back the Prime Minister's deal.

What we see in the debate is a marked difference of focus. We have on the Benches behind me colleagues on different sides of the referendum debate, such as my right hon. Friend the Member for

Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) and my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), coming together to look at how they can work on solutions, and we have a proposal from my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady) that will do just that. It will help us unlock the conversation with the European Union and get us even closer to delivering on the result of the referendum—a result, indeed, that so many on the Opposition Benches were committed to supporting in their manifesto.

Kate Hoey

Does the Secretary of State agree with me that, whatever we say in this House tonight, those who vote for amendments to delay article 50 and the whole process of leaving at the end of March will be seen by the public, even if they do not mean it, as wanting to stop Brexit?

Stephen Barclay

The hon. Lady is absolutely right: at best they delay Parliament in terms of getting clarity on an agreed plan, and at worst they disguise attempts to stop Brexit. It would be better if those Members who want to go back on their manifestos and indeed stop Brexit were more explicit about their intentions, because, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has repeatedly set out, there is only one way to stop no deal and that is to secure a deal or go back on the biggest vote in our democratic history.

In the remaining time let me turn briefly to the Leader of the Opposition's amendment because it contradicts what was said by the shadow Trade Secretary who said that a customs policy would give the EU

“power to decide our tariffs & quotas with 3rd countries. We'd be forced to liberalise our market but have no reciprocal access to theirs”,

The Leader of the Opposition's amendment would leave the door open for a second referendum, which is something his own Front-Bench colleagues have said they oppose.

Emma Reynolds

Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Barclay

Of course I will give way.

Emma Reynolds

I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way; he is being very generous. Can he spell out to the House—please do not refer to an article in the political declaration—what are the alternative arrangements to the backstop that the Government want to pursue with the EU?

Stephen Barclay

I have five minutes left and will come on to that point—[Interruption.] Unlike my opposite number, I will take interventions and I will come on to the alternative arrangements, because they go to the heart of the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West.

Before doing so, I want to touch briefly, in the time available, on the amendments tabled by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) and by the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford. I do not for a minute question the principled spirit in which they have been proposed, but the reality is that they would have significant wider implications beyond Brexit. That is not just my view or, indeed, that of my right hon. Friend the

Prime Minister. It is also the view of leading constitutional experts such as Philip Cowley and Vernon Bogdanor, the latter of whom said that

“the proposals...have international as well as domestic implications.”

The House needs to consider carefully the lack of debate and clarity as to the amendments’ proposed policy, and the lack of certainty as to their intent and consequences. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), the former Chief Whip, has pointed out, the danger is that they will, in essence, act as a Trojan horse against the stated intention.

I do not for a minute doubt my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) when he says that changing Standing Orders has precedence—of course it does—but there has been no debate about that with the Procedure Committee or in this House. The wider constitutional implications, which have been referred to by leading experts in the field, cannot simply be swept away in the short-term convenience of the moment.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) tabled a principled amendment, but she spoke of a simple vote on saying no to no deal. That issue was taken head on by the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) when he pointed out that the practical effect of taking no deal off the table would not facilitate the amendment’s intention. I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. It is not just those on the DUP Benches who hold that view. On 24 January, Michel Barnier himself said that

“it is not enough to vote against the No Deal...if no positive suggestions are put on the table, then we will be more or less bumpy or heading for the No Deal on March 30, as in an accident.”

The way to address no deal is by backing the deal of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister.

There has been much discussion of the proposal of my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse). Although it is not the subject of an amendment on today’s Order Paper, it has given us many technical questions to consider and we will seek the experts’ views. We will take forward the spirit of goodwill on which it builds, as part of reaching the common ground the House needs.

Lady Hermon

I have waited very, very patiently, but I have run out of patience. I would like the Secretary of State to explain to this House exactly what the alternative arrangements are. It is a straightforward question and we are entitled to a straightforward answer.

Stephen Barclay

That will be part of the negotiation that we will discuss in terms of the technical issues. What is not in doubt is that our commitment is shared by the hon. Lady, who has criticised those on the Labour Benches who, unlike the sister parties of the Labour movement in Northern Ireland, have not backed this deal or reflected the will of either the Labour movement in the south or that in the north. The fact is that they have walked away from the deal, even though the deal is the way to secure our steadfast commitment, which my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister repeated today, to ensuring that no hard border returns to Northern Ireland.

Stephen Barclay

Given that I have just a minute left, I will not give way.

Across leave and remain constituencies, we hear the same overwhelming call for the House to get on with it. Although 17.4 million people did not vote for no deal, they voted to leave. Time is of the essence. Citizens and business want certainty; the EU wants clarity; the Prime Minister needs a mandate and the House must therefore come together. It is time to act in the national interest. That is why the House should back amendment (n) tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West.

19:00:00

The Speaker put the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Order, this day.)

Amendment proposed: (a), in line 1, leave out from “House” to end and add

“requires ministers to secure sufficient time for the UK Parliament to consider and vote on options to prevent the UK leaving the EU without a ratified Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration, and that those options should include:

(i) Negotiating changes to the draft Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration so as to secure a permanent customs union with the EU, a strong relationship with the single market underpinned by shared institutions and obligations, and dynamic alignment on rights and standards, in order to command a majority in the House of Commons;

(ii) Legislating to hold a public vote on a deal or a proposition that has commanded the support of the majority of the House of Commons.”.—(Jeremy Corbyn.)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

Division 307

29/01/2019 19:00:00

The House divided:

Ayes: 296

Noes: 327

Question accordingly negatived.

Amendment proposed: (o), in line 1, leave out from “House” to end and add

“notes that the Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales and House of Commons all voted overwhelmingly to reject the Prime Minister’s deal; calls for the Government to seek an extension of the period specified under Article 50(3) of the Treaty on European Union; agrees a No Deal outcome should be ruled out; and recognises that if the UK is an equal partnership of nations, the 62 per cent vote to remain at the EU referendum on 23 June 2016 in Scotland should be respected and that the people of Scotland should not be taken out of the EU against their will.”.— (Ian Blackford.)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

Division 308

29/01/2019 19:14:00

The House divided:

Ayes: 39

Noes: 327

Question accordingly negatived.

Amendment proposed: (g), at end, add—

“and orders that on 12 and 26 February and 5, 12, 19 and 26 March 2019—

(a) Standing Order No. 14(1) which provides that government business shall have precedence at every sitting save as provided in that order) shall not apply;

(b) a Motion in the name of the Chairman of Ways and Means “That this House has considered the United Kingdom’s departure from, and future relationship with, the European Union” shall stand as the first item of business;

(c) Standing Order No. 24B (Amendments to motions to consider specified matters) shall not apply to such motions;

(d) proceedings on the motion may continue for up to six and a half hours after its commencement, though opposed, and shall not be interrupted at the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) will not apply; and

(e) at the conclusion of those proceedings, the Speaker shall put the questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the motion, which shall include the questions on any amendments selected by the Speaker, which may then be moved.”.—(Mr Grieve.)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

Division 309

29/01/2019 19:28:00

The House divided:

Ayes: 301

Noes: 321

Question accordingly negatived.

Amendment proposed: (b), at end, add

“and is conscious of the serious risks arising for the United Kingdom from exit without a withdrawal agreement and political declaration and orders accordingly that—

(1) On 5 February 2019—

(a) Standing Order No. 14(1) (which provides that government business shall have precedence at every sitting save as provided in that order) shall not apply;

(b) a Business of the House Motion in connection with the European Union (Withdrawal) (No. 3) Bill in the name of at least 10 Members, including at least four Members elected to the House as members of at least four different parties and at least two backers of that Bill shall stand as the first item of business;

(c) that motion may be proceeded with until any hour though opposed, shall not be interrupted at the moment of interruption, and, if under discussion when business is postponed, under the provisions

of any standing order, may be resumed, though opposed, after the interruption of business; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) will not apply;

(d) at the conclusion of debate on that motion, the questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on that motion (including for the purposes of Standing Order No. 36(2) (Questions to be put following closure of debate)) shall include the questions on any amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; and

(e) the second reading of the European Union (Withdrawal) (No. 3) Bill shall stand as the first order of the day; and

(2) In respect of the European Union (Withdrawal) (No. 3) Bill, notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before the Bill has been read a second time.”—(Yvette Cooper.)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

Division 310

29/01/2019 19:42:00

The House divided:

Ayes: 298

Noes: 321

Question accordingly negatived.

Amendment proposed: (j), at end, add

“and, in the event that the House of Commons has not passed a resolution approving the negotiated withdrawal agreement and the framework for the future relationship for the purposes of section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 by 26 February 2019, requires the Prime Minister to seek an extension to the period of two years specified in Article 50(3) of the Treaty on European Union.”.—(Rachel Reeves.)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

Division 311

29/01/2019 19:56:00

The House divided:

Ayes: 290

Noes: 322

Question accordingly negatived.

Amendment proposed: (i), at end, add

“and rejects the United Kingdom leaving the European Union without a Withdrawal Agreement and a Framework for the Future Relationship.”—(Dame Caroline Spelman.)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

Division 312

29/01/2019 20:11:00

The House divided:

Ayes: 318

Noes: 310

Question accordingly agreed to.

Amendment proposed: (n), at end, add

“and requires the Northern Ireland backstop to be replaced with alternative arrangements to avoid a hard border; supports leaving the European Union with a deal and would therefore support the Withdrawal Agreement subject to this change.”—(Sir Graham Brady.)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

Division 313

29/01/2019 20:26:00

The House divided:

Ayes: 317

Noes: 301

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House, in accordance with the provisions of section 13(6)(a) and 13(11)(b)(i) and 13(13)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, has considered the Written Statement titled “Statement under Section 13(4) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018” and made on 21 January 2019, and the Written Statement titled “Statement under Section 13(11)(a) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018” and made on 24 January 2019, and rejects the United Kingdom leaving the European Union without a Withdrawal Agreement and a Framework for the Future Relationship, and requires the Northern Ireland backstop to be replaced with alternative arrangements to avoid a hard border; supports leaving the European Union with a deal and would therefore support the Withdrawal Agreement subject to this change.

The Prime Minister

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. A fortnight ago, this House clearly rejected the proposed withdrawal agreement and political declaration, with just 202 Members voting in favour. Tonight, a majority of hon. Members have said that they would support a deal with changes to the backstop combined with measures to address concerns over Parliament’s role in the negotiation of the future relationship and commitments on workers’ rights in law where need be. It is now clear that there is a route that can secure a substantial and sustainable majority in this House for leaving the EU with a deal. We will now take this mandate forward and seek to obtain legally binding changes to the withdrawal agreement that deal with concerns on the backstop while guaranteeing no return to a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. My colleagues and I will talk to the EU about how we address the House’s views.

As I said this afternoon, there is limited appetite for such a change in the EU and negotiating it will not be easy, but in contrast to a fortnight ago, this House has made it clear what it needs to approve a withdrawal agreement. Many hon. Members have said that the continuing protection of workers’ rights after Brexit is something that needs to be strengthened. My right hon. Friend the Business Secretary will intensify our work with hon. Members from across the House and the trade unions this week. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union will do the

same on how we engage this House further in our approach to negotiating our future partnership with the EU.

As well as making clear what changes it needs to approve the withdrawal agreement, the House has also reconfirmed its view that it does not want to leave the EU without a withdrawal agreement and future framework. I agree that we should not leave without a deal. However, simply opposing no deal is not enough to stop it. The Government will now redouble their efforts to get a deal that this House can support. To that end, I want to invite my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) and all those who tabled amendments in opposition to no deal to discuss how we can deliver that by securing a deal.

In light of the defeat of the amendment of the Leader of the Opposition, I again invite him to take up my offer of a meeting to see whether we can find a way forward. If this House can come together, we can deliver the decision that the British people took in June 2016, restore faith in our democracy and get on with building a country that works for everyone. As Prime Minister, I will work with Members across the House to do just that.

Jeremy Corbyn

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Since we have had this debate and the House has emphatically voted to reject the no-deal option that the Prime Minister was supporting, may I say that we are prepared to meet her to put forward the Labour party's points of view about the kind of agreement we want with the European Union in order to protect jobs, living standards, and rights and conditions in this country? It is exactly the offer that was made last September and exactly the offer that was made two weeks ago. I look forward to meeting the Prime Minister to set out those views to her on behalf of my party.

Ian Blackford

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This House has spoken—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker

Order. The right hon. Gentleman is the leader of the third party in this place, and represents an important body of opinion. As was exhorted earlier, people should treat opinions that differ from their own with respect. The right hon. Gentleman will be heard, however long it takes. That is all there is to it.

Ian Blackford

Thank you, Mr Speaker. The House this evening has given an instruction to the Government that no deal must be taken off the table. I am frankly flabbergasted that the Prime Minister still seems to be in denial. What legislation will she bring forward to ensure that we remove the threat of no deal?

This is a sad day, when the Prime Minister has had to admit that her deal does not have support and that she is now prepared to try to pick away at the backstop. We were told that the backstop was there to protect the peace process, but tonight the Conservative party has effectively ripped apart the Good Friday agreement. This House should be ashamed of itself. The contempt shown by the United Kingdom Government right across these islands is stark.

This Government, Westminster and the Tory party have no respect for the devolved Administrations or the other regions of the United Kingdom. Scotland has been silenced, sidelined and shafted by the Tories. Tonight the Conservative party has ripped apart the Good Friday agreement—an international treaty. This is serious; we are talking about a treaty that has delivered

peace to the island of Ireland. The Government have reneged on the backstop and on the Good Friday agreement. Mr Speaker, can you advise what mechanisms are open to this House to protect the democratic rights of the devolved regions and nations, as well as the Good Friday agreement and the peace process that this Government are prepared to disregard?

Mr Speaker

I will take the right hon. Gentleman's question as a rhetorical question, rather than a substantive one. He knows that Parliament is here to debate and to vote, and he is well familiar—[Interruption.] Order. I am addressing the right hon. Gentleman; perhaps he would do me the courtesy of listening to me. He has the mechanisms of the House available to him.

Mr Speaker

Yes, I will take other points of order briefly.

Sir Vince Cable

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Now that the House has given the Prime Minister contradictory instructions—not to have no deal, but to pursue a course of action that will lead to no deal—will she return to the House tomorrow and give a clearer indication of what these alternative arrangements actually are? They have been rejected at her own summit at Chequers and now appear to be the basis of negotiations.

Mr Speaker

I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order, but I would say to him—I know that he will take this in the right spirit—that this is not Prime Minister's questions. Prime Minister's questions will take place tomorrow. If I understand correctly, I think the right hon. Gentleman was more concerned to make his point than to elicit a reply from the Prime Minister, and there is no reason for the Prime Minister to feel any need to reply tonight. The right hon. Gentleman has made his point and there will be ample opportunity for further exchanges, doubtless tomorrow and in many subsequent days.

Nigel Dodds

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. We represent 10 seats in Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) represents one other, and there are others who represent a different point of view but who refuse to take their seats in this House, and it is quite frankly outrageous—I am, I believe, speaking on behalf of both communities in Northern Ireland—to say that this vote tonight drives a coach and horses through the Good Friday agreement. It does nothing of the sort. It is utterly reckless to talk in those terms—utterly reckless. The fact of the matter is that nobody in Northern Ireland—no political party—is advocating any kind of hard border in the island of Ireland, and we certainly do not advocate what others advocate, which is creating borders within the United Kingdom or ripping up the United Kingdom. Let me say in conclusion that this is a significant night because, for the first time, the House, by a majority, has expressed a view on the sort of deal that will get through and will have a majority. We will work with the Prime Minister to deliver the right deal for the United Kingdom.

Mr Speaker

I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order.

Liz Saville Roberts

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. When the woman holding the title of Prime Minister is driven solely by the ideal of holding the Tory party together, and the man known as the Leader of the

Opposition will neither lead nor oppose, how do you advise that we get the House back to working for the communities we are supposed to represent?

Mr Speaker

Again, if I may very politely say so, I think the hon. Lady's point of order, although it contains what is ostensibly an inquiry, is one in which she is making her point rather than seeking anything from me. The short answer to her is that, as I said a moment ago, there will be further debate. Members must speak and vote as they think fit. All of these matters will be thoroughly aired in the days and weeks to come, and I am sure we all look forward to that—the hon. Lady from her vantage point and I from mine.

Angus Brendan MacNeil

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I hope you can advise. The House seems to have found itself in a contradictory position. First, it wants no deal off the table; and secondly, it does not accept the deal that the European Union is putting forward. Is it not the case that the United Kingdom Parliament is now at the mercy of the European Union, because if we are in a situation where no deal is off the table and we are not accepting the deal the EU is offering, where do we go from here?

Mr Speaker

The hon. Gentleman may wish to offer the views that he has just expressed to the news outlets that operate in Na h-Eileanan an Iar, and I rather suspect that that is what he will want to do. Local newspapers and radio stations will doubtless be very interested in the views that he wishes to express, but they are not matters of which I can treat now. The House has decided what it has decided—[Interruption.] The hon. Gentleman is saying that these matters are in contradiction of each other or have to be weighed against each other, but of course it is not a matter for the Chair to offer an exegesis to the House on the way in which it has voted. Members will make their own assessment. We know what statute says and we know what expressions of opinion have been recorded by the House today. The hon. Gentleman, although his brow is furrowed, is a perspicacious fellow, and I am sure he will get his head around these matters in the hours, days and weeks to come. We look forward to that with eager anticipation.