

PM statement to the House of Commons

26 February 2019

26 February 2019 (Transcript of the speech, exactly as it was delivered)

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the Government's work to secure a Withdrawal Agreement that can command the support of this House.

A fortnight ago I committed to come back before the House today if the Government had not by now secured a majority for a Withdrawal Agreement and a Political Declaration.

In the two weeks since, my Rt Hon Friends the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the Attorney General and I have been engaging in focused discussions with the EU to find a way forward that will work for both sides. We are making good progress in that work.

I had a constructive meeting with President Juncker in Brussels last week, to take stock of the work done by our respective teams.

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

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

I also had a number of positive meetings at the EU-League of Arab States Summit in Sharm el-Sheikh, including with President Donald Tusk.

I have now spoken to the leaders of every single EU member state to explain the UK's position.

And the UK and EU teams are continuing their work and we agreed to review progress again in the coming days.

As part of these discussions, the UK and EU have agreed to consider a joint work stream to develop alternative arrangements to ensure the absence of a hard border in Northern Ireland.

This work will be done in parallel with the future relationship negotiations and is without prejudice to them.

Our aim is to ensure that, even if the full future relationship is not in place by the end of the implementation period, the backstop is not needed because we have a set of alternative arrangements ready to go.

I want to thank my Hon and Rt Hon friends for their contribution to this work and reaffirm that we are seized of the need to progress that work as quickly as possible.

President Juncker has already agreed that the EU will give priority to this work. And the Government expects that this will be an important strand of the next phase.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the EU will be having further discussions with Michel Barnier and we will announce details ahead of the Meaningful Vote.

We will also be setting up domestic structures to support this work, including ensuring we can take advice from external experts involved in customs processes around the world, from businesses who trade with the EU and beyond – and, of course, from colleagues across the House.

This will all be supported by civil service resource as well as funding for the Government to help develop, test and pilot proposals which can form part of these alternative arrangements.

Mr Speaker, I know what this House needs in order to support a Withdrawal Agreement.

The EU knows what is needed.

And I am working hard to deliver it.

As well as changes to the backstop, we are also working across a number of other areas to build support for the Withdrawal Agreement and to give the House confidence in the future relationship that the UK and EU will go on to negotiate.

This includes ensuring that leaving the EU will not lead to any lowering of standards in relation to workers' rights, environmental protections or health and safety.

[Political content removed].

Not only would giving up control go against the spirit of the referendum result, it would also mean accepting new EU laws automatically, even if they were to reduce workers' rights or change them in a way that was not right for us.

Instead, and in the interests of building support across the House, we are prepared to commit to giving Parliament a vote on whether it wishes to follow suit whenever the EU standards in areas such as workers' rights and health and safety are judged to have been strengthened.

The Government will consult with businesses and trade Unions as it looks at new EU legislation and decides how the UK should respond.

We will legislate to give our commitments on both non-regression and future developments force in UK law.

And following further cross-party talks, we will shortly be bringing forward detailed proposals to ensure that as we leave the EU, we not only protect workers' rights, but continue to enhance them.

Mr Speaker, as the government committed to the House last week, we are today publishing the paper assessing our readiness for No Deal.

I believe that if we have to, we will ultimately make a success of a No Deal.

But this paper provides an honest assessment of the very serious challenges it would bring in the short-term – and further reinforces why the best way for this House to honour the referendum result is to leave with a deal.

As I committed to the House, the Government will today table an amendable motion for debate tomorrow.

But I know Members across the House are genuinely worried that time is running out, that if the Government doesn't come back with a further meaningful vote or it loses that vote, Parliament won't have time to make its voice heard on the next steps. I know too that members across the House are deeply concerned by the effect of the current uncertainty on businesses.

So today I want to reassure the House by making three further commitments.

First, we will hold a second Meaningful Vote by Tuesday 12 March at the latest.

Second, if the Government has not won a Meaningful Vote by Tuesday 12 March then it will – in addition to its obligations to table a neutral, amendable motion under section 13 of the EU Withdrawal Act – table a motion to be voted on by Wednesday 13 March at the latest, asking this House if it supports leaving the EU without a Withdrawal Agreement and a framework for a future relationship on 29 March.

So the United Kingdom will only leave without a deal on 29 March if there is explicit consent in this House for that outcome.

Third, if the House, having rejected leaving with the deal negotiated with the EU, then rejects leaving on 29 March without a withdrawal agreement and future framework, the Government will, on 14 March, bring forward a motion on whether Parliament wants to seek a short limited extension to Article 50 – and if the House votes for an extension, seek to agree that extension approved by the House with the EU, and bring forward the necessary legislation to change the exit date commensurate with that extension.

These commitments all fit the timescale set out in the Private Members Bill in the name of the Rt Hon Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford.

They are commitments I am making as Prime Minister and I will stick by them, as I have previous commitments to make statements and table amendable motions by specific dates.

Let me be clear, I do not want to see Article 50 extended. Our absolute focus should be on working to get a deal and leaving on 29 March.

An extension beyond the end of June would mean the UK taking part in the European Parliament elections. What kind of message would that send to the more than 17 million people who voted to leave the EU nearly three years ago now? And the House should be clear that a short extension – not beyond the end of June – would almost certainly have to be a one-off. If we had not taken part in the European Parliament elections, it would be extremely difficult to extend again, so it would create a much sharper cliff edge in a few months' time.

An extension cannot take no deal off the table. The only way to do that is to revoke Article 50, which I shall not do, or agree a deal.

Now, I have been clear throughout this process that my aim is to bring the country back together.

This House can only do that by implementing the decision of the British people.

The Government is determined to do so in a way that commands the support of this House.

But just as government requires the support of this House in delivering the vote of the British people, so the House should respect the proper functions of the Government.

Tying the Government's hands by seeking to commandeer the order paper would have far-reaching implications for the way in which the United Kingdom is governed and the balance of powers and responsibilities in our democratic institutions.

And it would offer no solution to the challenge of finding a deal which this House can support.

Neither would seeking an extension to Article 50 now make getting a deal any easier.

Ultimately the choices we face would remain unchanged – leave with a deal, leave with no deal, or have no Brexit.

So when it comes to that motion tomorrow, the House needs to come together, as we did on 29 January, and send a clear message that there is a stable majority in favour of leaving the EU with a deal.

A number of Hon and Rt Hon Members have understandably raised the rights of EU citizens living in the UK.

As I set out last September, following the Salzburg Summit – even in the event of no deal, the rights of the three million EU citizens living in the UK will be protected.

That is our guarantee to them.

They are our friends, our neighbours, our colleagues. We want them to stay.

But a separate agreement for citizens' rights is something the EU have been clear they do not have the legal authority for.

If it is not done in a Withdrawal Agreement, these issues become a matter member states unless the EU were to agree a new mandate to take this forward.

At the very start of this process the UK sought to separate out this issue, but that was something which the EU has been consistent on.

However, my Right Hon Friend the Foreign Secretary has written to all of his counterparts and we are holding further urgent discussions with member states to seek assurances on the rights of UK citizens.

I urge all EU countries to make this guarantee and end the uncertainty for these citizens.

I hope that the government's efforts can give the House – and EU Citizens here in the UK – the reassurances they need and deserve.

Mr Speaker, for some Hon and Rt Hon Members, taking the United Kingdom out of the European Union is the culmination of a long and sincerely fought campaign.

For others, leaving the EU goes against much that they have stood for and fought for with equal sincerity for just as long.

But Parliament gave the choice to the people.

In doing so we told them we would honour their decision.

Mr Speaker, that remains the resolve of this side of the House.

[Political content removed.]

This House voted to trigger Article 50, and this House has a responsibility to deliver on the result.

The very credibility of our democracy is at stake.

By leaving the EU with a deal, we can move our country forward.

Even with the uncertainty we face today, we have more people in work than ever before, wages growing at their fastest rate for a decade and debt falling as a share of the economy.

If we can leave with a deal, end the uncertainty and move on beyond Brexit, we can do so much more to deliver real economic progress to every part of country.

So I hope tomorrow this House can show that...

...with legally binding changes on the backstop...

...commitments to protect workers' rights and the environment...

...an enhanced role for Parliament in the next phase of negotiations...

...and a determination to address the wider concerns of those who voted to leave...

...we will have a deal that this House can support.

And in doing so, that we send a clear message: That this House is resolved to honour the result of the referendum and leave the European Union with a deal.

And I commend this statement to the House.