

PM's statement to the House of Commons on Brexit: 12 February 2019

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the Government's ongoing work to secure a Brexit deal that honours our commitments to the people of Northern Ireland, commands the support of Parliament and can be negotiated with the EU.

On 29th January, this House gave me a clear mandate and sent an unequivocal message to the European Union. Last week, I took that message to Brussels.

I met President Juncker, President Tusk, and the President of European Parliament, Antonio Tajani – and I told them clearly what Parliament wanted in order to unite behind a Withdrawal Agreement: namely, legally binding changes to the backstop.

And I explained to them the three ways in which this can be achieved.

First, the backstop could be replaced with alternative arrangements to avoid a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland.

Yesterday, my Rt Hon Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union met with Michel Barnier to discuss the ideas put forward by the Alternative Arrangements Working Group comprised of a number of my Hon and Rt Hon Friends.

I am grateful to that group for their work and we are continuing to explore their ideas.

Second, there could be a legally-binding time limit to the existing backstop.

Or third, there could be a legally-binding unilateral exit clause to that backstop.

Given both sides agree we do not ever want to use the backstop, and that if we did it would be temporary, we believe it is reasonable to ask for legally binding changes to this effect.

Mr Speaker, as expected, President Juncker maintained the EU's position that they will not reopen the Withdrawal Agreement.

And I set out the UK's position, strengthened by the mandate that this House gave me, that this House needs to see legally-binding changes to the backstop and that can be achieved by changes to the Withdrawal Agreement.

We both agreed that our teams should hold further talks to find a way forward, and he and I will meet again before the end of February to take stock of those discussions.

So our work continues. The Secretary of State and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster are today in Strasbourg and last week the Attorney General was in Dublin to meet his Irish counterpart.

And following my own visits to Brussels, Northern Ireland and Ireland last week, I welcomed the Prime Minister of Malta to Downing Street yesterday and I will be speaking to other EU 27 leaders today and throughout the week.

The Right Honourable Gentleman, the Leader of the Opposition, shares the concerns of this House on the backstop. I welcome his willingness to sit down and talk to me and I look forward to continuing our discussions.

Indeed, Government Ministers will be meeting with members of his team tomorrow.

I think there are a number of areas where the whole House should be able to come together.

In particular, I believe we have a shared determination across this House not to allow the UK leaving the EU to mean any lowering of standards in relation to workers' rights, environmental protections or health and safety.

I have met Trade Unions and with members from across the House, and my Rt Hon Friend the Business Secretary is leading work to ensure that we fully address all concerns about these vital issues.

We have already made legally-binding commitments to no regression in these areas if we were to enter the backstop - and we are prepared to consider legislating to give these commitments force in UK law.

And in the interests of building support across the House, we are also prepared to commit to asking Parliament whether it wishes to follow suit whenever the EU changes its standards in these areas. And of course we don't need to automatically follow EU standards in order to lead the way - as we have done in the past under both Conservative and Labour Governments.

The UK has a proud tradition of leading the way in workers' rights, whilst maintaining a flexible labour market that has helped deliver an employment rate almost 6 percentage points above the EU average.

Successive governments of all parties have put in place standards that exceed the minimums set by the EU.

A Labour government gave British workers annual leave and paid maternity leave entitlements well above that required by the European Union.

A Conservative-led government went further than the EU by giving all employees the right to request flexible working. And I was proud to be the Minister for Women and Equalities to introduce shared parental leave so that both parents are able to take on caring responsibilities for their child – something no EU regulation provides for.

When it comes to workers' rights this Parliament has set a higher standard before and I believe will do so in the future.

Indeed we already have plans to repeal the so-called Swedish derogation, which allows employers to pay their agency workers less, and we are committed to enforcing holiday pay for the most vulnerable workers.

Not just protecting workers' rights, but extending them.

As I set out in my statement two weeks ago, the House also agrees that Parliament must have a much stronger and clearer role in the next phase of the negotiations.

Because the Political Declaration cannot be legally binding and in some areas provides for a spectrum of outcomes – some Members are understandably concerned that they cannot be sure precisely what future relationship it would lead to.

By following through on our commitments and giving Parliament that bigger say in the mandate for the next phase, we are determined to address those concerns.

The Secretary of State has written to all Members of the Exiting the EU Committee seeking their view on engaging Parliament in this next phase of negotiations.

And we are also reaching out beyond this House to engage more deeply with businesses, civil society and trade unions.

Everyone in this House knows that the vote for Brexit was not just about changing our relationship with the EU, but changing how things work at home, especially for those in communities who feel they have been left behind.

Addressing this and widening opportunities is the mission of this Government that I set out on my first day as Prime Minister, and I will continue to work with Members across the House to do everything we can to help build a country that works for everyone.

But, Mr Speaker, one area where the Rt Hon Gentleman the Leader of the Opposition and I do not agree is on his suggestion that the UK should remain a member of the EU Customs Union.

I would gently point out that the House of Commons has already voted against this. And in any case, membership of the Customs Union would be a less desirable outcome than that which is provided for in the Political Declaration.

That would deliver no tariffs, fees, charges or quantitative restrictions across all sectors, and no checks on rules of origin.

But crucially, it would also provide for the development of an independent trade policy for the UK that would allow us to strike our own trade deals around the world, something the Labour Party once supported.

On Thursday, as I promised in the House last month, we will bring forward an amendable motion.

This will seek to reaffirm the support of the House for the amended motion from 29th January – namely to support the Government in seeking changes to the backstop and to recognise that negotiations are ongoing.

Having secured an agreement with the European Union for further talks, we now need some time to complete that process.

When we achieve the progress we need, we will bring forward another meaningful vote.

But if the Government has not secured a majority in this House in favour of a Withdrawal Agreement and a Political Declaration, then the Government will on Tuesday 26 February make a statement and table an amendable motion relating to the statement; and a Minister will move that motion on Wednesday 27 February, thereby enabling the House to vote on it, and on any amendments to it, on that day.

Mr Speaker, as well as making clear what is needed to change in the Withdrawal Agreement, the House has also reconfirmed its view that it does not want to leave the EU without a deal.

The government agrees. But opposing no deal is not enough to stop it.

We must agree a deal that this House can support. And that is what I am working to achieve. I've spoken before about the damage that would be done to public faith in our democracy if this House were to ignore the result of the 2016 referendum. In Northern Ireland last week, I heard again the importance of securing a Withdrawal Agreement that works for all the people of this United Kingdom. In Belfast I met not just with politicians but with leaders of civil society and business from across the community. Following this House's rejection of the Withdrawal Agreement, many people in Northern Ireland are worried about what the current uncertainty will mean for them. In this House we often focus on the practical challenges posed by the border in Northern Ireland. But for many people in Northern Ireland, what looms larger is the fear that the seamless border between Ireland and Northern Ireland that helped make the progress which has followed the Belfast Agreement possible might be disrupted. We must not let that happen and we shall not let that happen. The talks are at a crucial stage. We now all need to hold our nerve to get the changes this House requires and deliver Brexit on time. By getting the changes we need to the backstop; by protecting and enhancing workers' rights and environmental protections; and by enhancing the role of Parliament in the next phase of negotiations I believe we can reach a deal that this House can support. We can deliver for the people and the communities that voted for change two and half years ago – and whose voices for too long have not been heard. We can honour the result of the referendum. And we can set this country on course for the bright future that every part of this United Kingdom deserves. That is this Government's mission. We shall not stint in our efforts to fulfil it. And I commend this statement to the House.