

Prime Minister Theresa May's statement in the House of Commons on the new Brexit deal

22 May 2019

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the Government's work to deliver Brexit by putting forward a new deal that members of this House can stand behind.

We need to see Brexit through, to honour the result of the referendum, and to deliver the change the British people so clearly demanded.

I sincerely believe that most members of this House feel the same.

That, for all our division and disagreement, we believe in democracy.

That we want to make good on the promise we made to the British people when we asked them to decide on the future of our EU membership.

As to how we make that happen, recent votes have shown that there is no majority in this House for leaving with no deal.

And this House has voted against revoking Article 50.

It is clear that the only way forward is leaving with a deal – but it is equally clear that this will not happen without compromise on all sides of the debate.

That starts with the Government, which is why we have just held six weeks of detailed talks with the Opposition – talks that the Leader of the Opposition chose to end before a formal agreement was reached, but which nonetheless revealed areas of common ground.

And having listened to the Opposition, to other party leaders, to the devolved administrations, to business leaders, trade unionists and others, we are now making a 10-point offer to Members across the House.

Ten changes that address the concerns raised by Hon and Rt Hon Members.

Ten binding commitments that will be enshrined in legislation so they cannot simply be ignored.

And 10 steps that will bring us closer to the bright future that awaits our country once we end the political impasse and get Brexit done.

First, we will protect British jobs by seeking as close to frictionless trade in goods with the EU as possible while outside the single market and ending free movement.

The government will be placed under a legal duty to negotiate our future relationship on this basis.

Second, we will provide much-needed certainty for our vital manufacturing and agricultural sectors by keeping up to date with EU rules for goods and agri-food products that are relevant to checks at the border.

Such a commitment – which will also be enshrined in legislation – will help protect thousands of skilled jobs that depend on just-in-time supply chains.

Third, we will empower Parliament to break the deadlock over future customs arrangements.

Both the Government and Opposition agree that we must have as close as possible to frictionless trade at the UK-EU border – protecting the jobs and livelihoods that are sustained by our existing trade with the EU.

But while we agree on the ends, we disagree on the means.

The Government has already put forward a proposal which delivers the benefits of a customs union but with the ability for the UK to determine its own trade and development policy.

The Opposition are both sceptical of our ability to negotiate that and don't believe an independent trade policy is in the national interest. They would prefer a comprehensive customs union – with a UK say in EU trade policy but with the EU negotiating on our behalf.

As part of the cross-party discussions the government offered a compromise option of a temporary customs union on goods only, including a UK say in relevant EU trade policy, so that the next government can decide its preferred direction.

But we were not able to reach agreement – so instead we will commit in law to let Parliament decide this issue, and to reflect the outcome of this process in legislation.

Fourth, to address concerns that a future government could roll back hard-won protections for employees, we will publish a new Workers' Rights Bill.

As I have told the House many times, successive British administrations of all colours have granted British workers' rights and protections well above the standards demanded by Brussels.

But I know that people want guarantees, and I am happy to provide them.

If passed by Parliament, this Bill will guarantee that the rights enjoyed by British workers can be no less favourable than those of their counterparts in the EU – both now and in the future.

And we will discuss further amendments with trade unions and business.

Fifth, the new Brexit deal will also guarantee there will be no change in the level of environmental protection when we leave the EU. And we will establish a new and wholly independent Office of Environmental Protection, able to uphold standards and enforce compliance.

Sixth, the Withdrawal Agreement Bill will place a legal duty on government to seek changes to the political declaration that will be needed to reflect this new deal – I am confident we will be successful in doing so.

Seventh, the Government will include in the Withdrawal Agreement Bill at introduction a requirement to vote on whether to hold a second referendum.

I have made my own view clear on this many times – I am against a second referendum.

We should be implementing the result of the first referendum, not asking the British people to vote in a second one.

What it would say about our democracy if the biggest vote in our history were to be re-run because this House didn't like the outcome?

What would it do to that democracy, what forces it would unleash?

But I recognise the genuine and sincere strength of feeling across the House on this important issue.

So to those MPs who want a second referendum to confirm the deal, I say: you need a deal and therefore a Withdrawal Agreement Bill to make it happen.

Let it have its Second Reading and then make your case to Parliament.

If this House votes for a referendum, it would require the Government to make provisions for such a referendum – including legislation if it wanted to ratify the Withdrawal Agreement.

Eighth, Parliament will be guaranteed a much greater role in the second part of the Brexit process: the negotiations over our future relationship with the EU.

In line with the proposal put forward by the Hon Members for Wigan and Stoke-on-Trent Central, the new Brexit deal will set out in law that the House of Commons will approve the UK's objectives for the negotiations.

And MPs will also be asked to approve the treaty governing that relationship before the Government signs it.

Ninth, the new Brexit deal will legally oblige the government to seek to conclude the Alternative Arrangements process by December 2020, avoiding any need for the Northern Ireland backstop coming into force.

This commitment is made in the spirit of the amendment tabled by my Hon Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West, passed by this House on 29 January.

And while it is not possible to use Alternative Arrangements to replace the backstop in the Withdrawal Agreement, we will ensure they are a viable alternative.

And finally, 10th, we will ensure that, should the backstop come into force, Great Britain will stay aligned with Northern Ireland.

We will prohibit the proposal that a future Government could split Northern Ireland off from the UK's customs territory

And we will deliver on our commitments to Northern Ireland in the December 2017 Joint Report in full.

We will implement paragraph 50 of the Joint Report in law.

The Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive will have to give their consent on a cross-community basis for new regulations which are added to the backstop.

And we will work with our Confidence and Supply Partners on how these commitments should be entrenched in law, so that Northern Ireland cannot be separated from the United Kingdom.

Following the end of EU election purdah, the Withdrawal Agreement Bill will be published on Friday so the House has the maximum possible time to study its detail.

If Parliament passes the Bill before the summer recess, the UK will leave the EU by the end of July.

We will be out of the EU political structures, out of ever closer union.

We will stop British laws being enforced by a European court.

We will end free movement.

We will stop making vast annual payments to the EU budget.

By any definition, that alone is delivering Brexit.

And by leaving with a deal we can do so much more besides.

We can protect jobs, guarantee workers' rights, maintain the close security partnerships that do so much to keep us all safe.

We will ensure that there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland.

And we can bring an end to the months – years – of increasingly bitter argument and division that have both polarised and paralysed our politics.

We can move on, move forwards, and get on with the jobs we were sent here to do, what we got into politics to do.

That is what we can achieve if we support this new deal.

Reject it, and all we have before us is division and deadlock.

We risk leaving with no deal, something this House is clearly against.

We risk stopping Brexit altogether, something the British people would simply not tolerate.

We risk creating further division at a time when we need to be acting together in the national interest.

And we guarantee a future in which our politics become still more polarised and voters increasingly despair as they see us failing to do what they asked of us.

None of us want to see that happen.

The opportunity of Brexit is too large and the consequences of failure too grave to risk further delay.

So in the weeks ahead there will be opportunities for MPs on all sides to have their say, to table amendments, to shape the Brexit they and their constituents want to see.

Mr Speaker, in time another Prime Minister will be standing at this despatch box.

But while I am here, I have a duty to be clear with the House about the facts.

If we are going to deliver Brexit in this Parliament we are going to have to pass a Withdrawal Agreement Bill.

And we will not do so without holding votes on the issues that have divided us the most – that includes votes on customs arrangements and on a second referendum.

We can pretend otherwise and carry on arguing and getting nowhere.

But in the end our job in this House is to take decisions, not to duck them.

So I will put those decisions to this House.

Because that is my duty.

And because it is the only way that we can deliver Brexit.

So let us demonstrate what this House can achieve.

Let's come together, honour the referendum, deliver what we promised the British people, and build a successful future for our whole country.

And I commend this statement to the House.