

Statement by the Prime Minister

Leaving the EU

Monday, 21st January 2019

House of Commons

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May)

I am sure that the whole House will join me in condemning Saturday's car bomb attack in Londonderry and in paying tribute to the bravery of the Northern Ireland police and the local community, who helped to ensure that everyone got to safety. This House stands together with the people of Northern Ireland in ensuring that we never go back to the violence and terror of the past.

Let me now turn to Brexit. Following last week's vote, it is clear that the Government's approach had to change, and it has. Having established the confidence of Parliament in this Government, I have listened to colleagues across Parliament from different parties and with different views. Last week I met the leader of the Liberal Democrats, the Westminster leaders of the Democratic Unionist party, the Scottish National party, Plaid Cymru and the Green party, and Back Benchers from both sides of the House. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster also had a number of such meetings.

The Government have approached those meetings in a constructive spirit, without preconditions, and I am pleased that everyone whom we met took the same approach. I regret that the Leader of the Opposition has not chosen to take part so far, and I hope he will reflect on that decision. Given the importance of this issue, we should all be prepared to work together to find a way forward, and my ministerial colleagues and I will continue with further meetings this week.

Let me set out the six key issues that have been at the centre of the talks to date. The first two relate to the process for moving forward. First, there is widespread concern about the possibility of the UK's leaving without a deal. There are those on both sides of the House who want the Government to rule that out, but we need to be honest with the British people about what that means. The right way to rule out no deal is for the House to approve a deal with the European Union, and that is what the Government are seeking to achieve. The only other guaranteed way to avoid a no-deal Brexit is to revoke article 50, which would mean staying in the EU.

There are others who think that what we need is more time, so they say that we should extend article 50 to give Parliament longer to debate how we should leave and what a deal should look like. That is not ruling out no deal, but simply deferring the point of decision, and the EU is very unlikely simply to agree to extend article 50 without a plan for how we are going to approve a deal. So when people say, "Rule out no deal", what they are actually saying is that, if we in Parliament cannot approve a deal, we should revoke article 50. Those would be the consequences of what they are saying. I believe that that would go against the referendum result, and I do not believe that that is a course of action that we should take or one that the House should support.

Secondly, all the Opposition parties that have engaged so far, and some Back Benchers, have expressed their support for a second referendum. I have set out many times my deep concerns about returning to the British people for a second referendum. Our duty is to implement the decision of the first one. I fear that a second referendum would set a difficult precedent that could have significant implications for how we handle referendums in this country—not least, strengthening the hand of those who are campaigning to break up our United Kingdom. It would require an extension of article 50, and we would very likely have to return a new set of MEPs to the European Parliament in May.

I also believe that there has not yet been enough recognition of the way in which a second referendum could damage social cohesion by undermining faith in our democracy. We do not know what the Leader of the Opposition thinks about this because he has not engaged, but I know there are Members who have already indicated that they wish to test the support of the House for this path. I do not believe there is a majority for a second referendum and, if I am right, then just as the Government are having to think again about their approach going forwards, so too do those Members who believe this is the answer.

The remaining issues raised in the discussions relate to the substance of the deal, and on these points I believe we can make progress. Members of this House, predominantly but not only on the Government Benches and the DUP, continue to express their concern on the issue of the Northern Ireland backstop. All of us agree that as we leave the European Union we must fully respect the Belfast agreement and not allow the creation of a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, or indeed a border down the Irish sea. And I want to be absolutely clear, in the light of media stories this morning: this Government will not reopen the Belfast agreement. I have never even considered doing so, and nor would I.

With regard to the backstop, despite the changes we have previously agreed, there remain two core issues: the fear that we could be trapped in it permanently; and concerns over its potential impact on our Union if Northern Ireland is treated differently from the rest of the UK. So I will be talking further this week to colleagues, including in the DUP, to consider how we might meet our obligations to the people of Northern Ireland and Ireland in a way that can command the greatest possible support in the House. I will then take the conclusions of those discussion back to the EU.

From other parts of this House, concerns have also been raised over the political declaration. In particular, these have focused on a wish for further precision around the future relationship. The political declaration will provide the basis for developing our detailed negotiating mandate for the future and this new phase of negotiations will be different in a number of ways. It will cover a far broader range of issues in greater depth, and so will require us to build a negotiating team that draws on the widest expertise available, from trade negotiators to security experts and specialists in data and financial services. And as we develop our mandate across each of these areas, I want to provide reassurance to the House. Given the breadth of the negotiations, we will seek input from a wide range of voices from outside Government. That must include ensuring Parliament has a proper say, and fuller involvement, in these decisions.

It is Government's responsibility to negotiate, but it is also my responsibility to listen to the legitimate concerns of colleagues, both those who voted leave and those who voted remain, in shaping our negotiating mandate for our future partnership with the EU. So the Government will consult this House on their negotiating mandate, to ensure that Members have the chance to make their views known and that we harness the knowledge of all Select Committees across the full range of expertise needed for this next phase of negotiations, from security to trade. This will also strengthen the Government's hand in the negotiations, giving the EU confidence about our position and avoiding leaving the bulk of parliamentary debate to a point when we are under huge time pressure to ratify.

I know that to date Parliament has not felt it has enough visibility of the Government's position as it has been developed and negotiated. It has sought documents through Humble Addresses, but that mechanism cannot take into account the fact that some information when made public could weaken the UK's negotiating hand. So as the negotiations progress, we will also look to deliver confidential Committee sessions that can ensure Parliament has the most up-to-date information, while not undermining the negotiations. And we will regularly update the House, in particular before the six-monthly review points with the EU foreseen in the agreement.

While it will always be for Her Majesty's Government to negotiate for the whole of the UK, we are also committed to giving the devolved Administrations an enhanced role in the next phase, respecting their competence and vital interests in these negotiations. I hope to meet both First Ministers in the course of this week and will use the opportunity to discuss this further with them, and we will also look for further ways to engage elected representatives from Northern Ireland and regional representatives in England. Finally, we will reach out beyond this House and engage more deeply with businesses, civil society and trade unions. Fifthly, hon Members from across the House—*[Interruption.]*

The Prime Minister

Fifthly, hon Members from across the House have raised strong views that our exit from the EU should not lead to a reduction in our social and environmental standards, and in particular workers' rights. So I will ensure that we provide Parliament with a guarantee that not only will we not erode protection for workers' rights and the environment, but we will ensure this country leads the way. To that end, my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary indicated the Government's support for the proposed amendment to the meaningful vote put down by the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann), including that Parliament should be able to consider any changes made by the EU in these areas in future. My right hon. Friend and others will work with Members across the House, businesses and trade unions to develop proposals that give effect to this amendment, including looking at legislation where necessary.

Sixthly, and crucially, a number of Members have made powerful representations about the anxieties facing EU citizens in the UK and UK citizens in the EU who are waiting to have their status confirmed. We have already committed to ensuring that EU citizens in the UK will be able to stay and continue to access in-country benefits and services on broadly the same terms as now, in both a deal and a no-deal scenario. Indeed, the next phase of testing of the scheme for EU nationals to confirm their status has launched today. Having listened to concerns from Members, and organisations such as the 3million group, I can confirm today that, when we roll out the scheme in full on 30 March, the Government will waive the application fee so that there is no financial barrier for any EU nationals who wish to stay. Anyone who has applied, or will apply, during the pilot phase will have their fee reimbursed. More details about how this will work will be made available in due course. Some EU member states have similarly guaranteed the rights of British nationals in a no-deal scenario, and we will step up our efforts to ensure that they all do so.

Let me briefly set out the process for the days ahead. In addition to this statement, today I will lay a written ministerial statement, as required under section 13(4) and (5) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, and table a motion in neutral terms on this statement, as required by section 13(6). This motion will be amendable and will be debated and voted on in this House on 29 January, and I will provide a further update to the House during that debate. To be clear, this is not a rerun of the vote to ratify the agreement we have reached with the European Union, but the fulfilment of the process following the House's decision to reject that motion.

The process of engagement is ongoing. In the next few days, my ministerial colleagues and I will continue to meet Members on all sides of the House and representatives of the trade unions, business groups, civil society and others as we try to find the broadest possible consensus on a way forward. While I will disappoint those colleagues who hope to secure a second referendum, I do not believe that there is a majority in this House for such a path, and while I want to deliver a deal with the EU, I cannot support the only other way in which to take no deal off the table, which is to revoke article 50. So my focus continues to be on what is needed to secure the support of this House in favour of a Brexit deal with the EU.

My sense so far is that three key changes are needed. First, we will be more flexible, open and inclusive in how we engage Parliament in our approach to negotiating our future partnership with the European Union. Secondly, we will embed the strongest possible protections on workers' rights and the environment. Thirdly, we will work to identify how we can ensure that our commitment to no hard border in Northern Ireland and Ireland can be delivered in a way that commands the support of this House and the European Union. In doing so, we will honour the mandate of the British people and leave the European Union in a way that benefits every part of our United Kingdom and every citizen of our country. I commend this statement to the House.

#

#

Hansard
Monday, 21st January, 2019
Volume 653
No 237
Columns 25-29#