

European Union (Requirements Relating to Withdrawal)

Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health and Social Care Committee, Chair, Liaison Committee (Commons)

I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to establish requirements in connection to the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union.

We do not have the luxury of time. Unless an alternative is in place, in 58 days—just 29 sitting days—we will leave the EU with no deal. My Bill looks ahead to what happens if, as looks likely, the Prime Minister returns empty-handed from her mission impossible to Brussels, and is based on the recommendations of the 11th report of the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union, so I start by paying tribute to its Chair, Hilary Benn, and all its members for that excellent report.

The Prime Minister has repeatedly commented that, while the House has said what it does not want, it needs to decide what it does. In the event of there being no agreement to change the backstop, we will be back to square one, but with one important difference: we will be much nearer the no-deal cliff edge. In a nutshell, my Bill would allow the House to express its view on what could command the support of the House through a series of indicative votes on free-standing motions, and the Committee recommended that those be taken in order.

The motions would give the House an opportunity to vote first on the Prime Minister's negotiated withdrawal agreement and framework for the future relationship; secondly, on the option of leaving with no deal; thirdly, to instruct the Government to seek changes to the backstop—although I think by then we would have tested that to destruction; fourthly, to instruct the Government to seek a Canada-style deal, as set out in the report; fifthly, on seeking to join the European economic area through the pillar of the European Free Trade Association and remain in a customs union with the EU, or a variation of it; and finally, to return the decision to the British people by giving them the opportunity to decide in a public vote what kind of Brexit deal they want or whether they wish to remain in the EU on the current deal.

Last night, the House gave two instructions to the Government. Not for the first time, it rejected leaving the EU with no deal, but it also passed an amendment unilaterally requiring that the Northern Ireland backstop be replaced by unspecified "alternative arrangements" to avoid a hard border. It adds up, essentially, to tearing up the withdrawal agreement. Donald Tusk in his statement following the vote has made it clear that the backstop is part of the withdrawal agreement and that the withdrawal agreement is not open for renegotiation. Most people do not seriously feel that the EU will be prepared to renegotiate.

In the absence of meaningful changes to the withdrawal agreement, it is hard to see how the Government will secure support for a deal that we rejected so comprehensively, by a margin

of 230 votes. If my Bill went ahead, the House would have the opportunity to express its view on where the Prime Minister should go from here by giving it the opportunity not only to reject no deal but to consider other alternatives.

I want to be clear about why the House rejected no deal. No Government could seriously, knowingly and deliberately inflict such pain on their people. We are talking about changes not just to the economy but to livelihoods and jobs. It is the real world crashing into Brexit fantasy. It would affect not only our economy but many other sectors, including health, transport links, security, food and farming—the list is very long. No responsible Government could inflict that kind of pain, but unfortunately, up until now, the Prime Minister has given the House a binary choice: "My deal or no deal." My Bill would allow the House to say there are other routes forward.

Some colleagues want to press forward with an EEA-EFTA arrangement and a customs union, while others would prefer a Canada-style arrangement. We should all have the opportunity to vote on the way forward. I and many of my colleagues have made it clear we favour returning the decision to the British people to give them the final say. The problem with the original referendum was that it did not set out which of these many options the public were voting for. Once we know that decision, we will see that it is far removed from the sunlit uplands promised during the referendum campaign.

We need to seek the informed, valid consent of the British people; otherwise, we are pressing forward with a deal that commands the respect of neither leavers nor remainers. Nobody could realistically claim it is the will of the people, but if we give it back to the people and tell them exactly what is involved, so that they can weigh up the risks and benefits themselves, we will get that informed, valid consent, and then we could proceed together.

It is quite possible that the British people would decide to proceed with Brexit—I accept that—and they would need the absolute guarantee that it would then be acted on as quickly as possible, but a second vote would also allow them to change their minds. Everybody deserves the opportunity to change their mind. Even our first Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has famously commented that if people cannot change their minds in a democracy, it ceases to be a democracy.

I reject the notion sometimes put forward that it would be a betrayal of democracy to ask people again, and I particularly object to the assertion that it would cause civil unrest. We need to stop talking that up. Since when did this House bow or cave in to the concerns and demands of the far right? We should be standing up to them and making it absolutely clear that democracy does not stand still, and should never stand still, and that this House has a duty to give the public the right to vote and have the final say.

We must recognise that this call comes not from the EU but from the people—the hundreds of thousands of people who marched through the streets of London in the summer and the many hundreds of thousands beyond that who did not make it here but who have written to us and campaigned for the right to have the final say in a people's vote. The House owes it to them to debate and vote on that as part of a series of indicative votes, and I commend the Bill to the House.

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