

UK's Withdrawal from the European Union

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

I rise to speak to amendment (h) in my name and that of Dr Whitford. It seeks an extension to allow us to obtain the consent of the British people to whatever deal is approved by this House, with an option to remain.

Many of us believe that consent is at the heart of this argument. We are repeatedly told that the Prime Minister's deal is the will of the people. The truth of the matter is that it is not the will of Parliament. It has been voted down by this place by 230 at the first time of asking, and by 149 at the second time of asking. However, I would say that there is no evidence that it is the will of the public either. It is certainly not the will of the 48%, nor is it the will of a very significant number of those who voted to leave—both in this place and outside—because they write to tell me so very vigorously that they do not think that this is the Brexit they voted for.

The truth is that the great Brexit charlatans have been exposed for the lies they perpetrated during the campaign. This Brexit is nothing like the sunlit uplands that they were promised, and I would ask people how many of them would have voted for this dog's Brexit if it had been presented to them at that time.

Philippa Whitford Shadow SNP Spokesperson (Health and Social Care)

My hon. Friend is talking about consent, and there has been discussion about that. As a surgeon, I have always had to have explicit, signed, informed consent, and such a discussion is always based on risks and benefits. We did not have that debate before the referendum, and we have had it only now, so it is only now that people have had the chance to learn how this Brexit deal will affect them

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I thank my hon. Friend for that, and she is absolutely right. For someone to be able to consent to something, they need to know what they are consenting to. Let us face it: the risks and benefits of the various versions of Brexit are very different. The risks and benefits of no deal, WTO, the Prime Minister's deal, Norway and Norway plus the customs union are very different procedures, if we talk about this in strictly clinical terms.

The other thing about consent is that nobody would seriously proceed on the basis of a consent form that was signed nearly three years ago. Furthermore, young people in this country face being wheeled into the operating theatre for major constitutional, social and economic surgery based on a consent form that was signed by their grandparents nearly three years ago. This is the point: given the sheer weight, significance and implications for all of their futures, what is the constitutional outrage or the democratic outrage about pausing to check that we have their consent?

I say to those on the Government Front Bench that they will never be forgiven for the consequences of Brexit, unless they have taken the time to pause and ask for explicit consent for their version of it. Even if the House were to approve a Norway-style Brexit, with or without a customs union, that will still not represent what many people out there thought Brexit should be. There is therefore a compelling case for all hon. Members to be honest about the way people feel about this issue, and to pause to ask for explicit consent. If the Prime Minister were a surgeon, she would be struck off if she proceeded without consent.

Tim Loughton Conservative, East Worthing and Shoreham

Perhaps I could butt in on this medical love-in. When making her diagnosis, the hon. Lady seems to ignore that the patient is the EU. Does she seriously think that the health of the EU has improved so much after the last three years that the view of the public in this country would be any more endeared to it, given that 75% of the eurozone is in recession? It is Europe that has changed, not us.

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I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention—I still consider him a friend, even though I am on the Opposition Benches—but I gently point out that it is good he is not a surgeon if he cannot recognise who the patient is.

Many Members have made the point that now is not the time for this amendment and that we should table it later, but it has been a bit like "Waiting for Godot". "Now" will never be the right time, and we are just 15 days from falling off the cliff. I was there in the summer with 700,000 people who marched through the streets. Their call was: "We demand a people's vote". When did they want it? They wanted it now. They were not saying, "We want it when it is convenient for the Labour Front Bench".

I am sorry—I say this with great sincerity to Labour colleagues—but there was a clear promise to move to support a people's vote, and it is simply no good to keep backtracking on that. Today is the time for us to vote for this amendment. It may fail—I accept that—but there is nothing to stop us bringing it back and voting for it again.

Â I urge all colleagues who know that they support a people's vote to vote for this amendment today, and again when they get the opportunity. If people never demonstrate that they supported a people's vote that will be their greatest regret, and I am afraid the chances are that those on the Labour Front Bench will never move to wholeheartedly and unequivocally support a people's vote, unless there is significant pressure to do so. Those of us, from many parties, who have come together to press for a people's vote will support the amendment today. We urge hon. Members to join us, and to support it again next week.

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