

Leaving the European Union

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

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe.

"If a democracy cannot change its mind, it ceases to be a democracy."

Those are not my words, but those of our first Brexit Secretary, Mr Davis, who is one of many. The ability to change one's mind is a beautiful thing and something that we should particularly value in parliamentarians. As Maynard Keynes said:

"When the facts change, I change my mind."

Having a sealed mind—the inability to change one's mind—is something that we should be very careful about. That is where we are at the moment, I am afraid. We are in a situation in which people seem incapable of changing their mind, but the public are not.

It is very difficult to quote a figure for the number of people who have signed the petition to revoke article 50, because it is changing. When we started the debate, it was 6,036,045, but the last time I checked—a couple of minutes ago—it was 6,037,286. Some 10,804 of those signatories are in my constituency, which is almost 16% of the electorate. I pay tribute to the 355 people who signed the petition to leave with or without a deal, because we should recognise their voices in the debate. I also pay tribute to the 496 people who signed the petition for the second referendum.

There are lots of reasons to change one's mind. A good reason to change one's mind is that the circumstances have changed. Another is that one has looked at the evidence. I come to this seeing both sides of the debate, because I started out—originally, when the referendum campaign was launched—as a soft-leave Eurosceptic. However, as Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, I heard the evidence of harm week in, week out, and I came to the view that I was wrong. I was not afraid to say that. In fact, many colleagues said to me, "Don't tell people that you've changed your mind. Just put a cross in a different box. It will be very bad for your political career if you change your mind." It is astonishing that we have come to that—that parliamentarians are not honest and are not prepared to change their mind when they have looked at the evidence.

We focus on the idea that this is all about a WTO Brexit and trade, but from chairing the Health and Social Care Committee it became obvious to me that there is clear evidence of harm to social care, science and research from unpicking a close relationship that has brought enormous benefits for more than four decades. I looked at the harm that Brexit would cause to science and research. There is no version of Brexit that will benefit science and research, improve the situation for our health and social care workforce, or do anything positive for NHS funding.

Of course, the biggest, most remembered non-fact of all the referendum campaign was the £350 million a week for the NHS that never was. Those who led the leave campaign not only know that that was wrong, but valued the fact that people were quoting that figure and that there was a debate. I was in rooms with people who said to me, "Yes, we know the fact is wrong. It's not a fact. It's a gross figure, rather than a net figure," but they were prepared to keep saying it. Many of those people now sit on the Front Bench. It is quite extraordinary.

We must consider the big picture and the extent to which people were misled knowingly and deliberately during the referendum campaign. We must consider the very real evidence that has emerged in every area of the degree of harm. We must be honest about the fact that there were many different versions of Brexit. I am a former clinician – I have said this before – and it would be ridiculous to take someone into an operating theatre more than 1,000 days after they had signed a vague consent form for an operation of some sort. The surgeon would be struck off. The surgeon in this case, I am afraid, is our Prime Minister. Now that we know all the circumstances of Brexit, she has a duty, once we have settled on a version, to allow people to go back and weigh up the risks and benefits of a known deal. That is what is required to give consent.

That is particularly true for young people. We are taking people into the operating theatre kicking and screaming with a consent form signed by their grandparents. We owe it to the British people to check that we have their valid consent before we carry out this extraordinary act of constitutional, social and economic surgery on the population. We have time to do so. We should take that time, and revocation is one way we could do that. We should revoke and reflect. As Martin Whitfield said, that does not cancel Brexit altogether; it just gives us the chance to pause. This is a significant decision, and we should take the time to ensure we get it right.

There are many good reasons to change one's mind, but there are some that are less honourable, such as changing one's mind because it suits one's leadership ambition or because this has all become about the unity of the Conservative party. The country is looking on in horror; it does not see those as reasons to change one's mind or to stick rigidly to a point of view when all the evidence to the contrary is compelling. Many of my constituents have said to me over and over again, "Why is it that all of you get to change your mind so many times but none of us does?" They just want the ability to reflect the fact that many of them have changed their mind.

Last weekend, I was with the million people – an extraordinary, positive outpouring from all around the country, walking past the Prime Minister's door peacefully and asking her to put this to the people. I contrast that with the crowds that were outside the gate when I cycled out last Friday, screaming at me, "Traitor!" and "Bitch!", and referring to other parts of my anatomy in a disgusting outpouring of hostility.

I hear the Prime Minister and others say that we cannot put this back to the people because it will unleash dark forces and division in our society, but those dark forces and division are already out there. We counter the far right not by appeasing them but by standing firm. Since when did this country not have a democratic process because we were afraid of the far right? I and many colleagues in this House have had to face that blast full on. I will not be quiet; I will keep saying loud and clear that it is time we put this back to the people.

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

Will the hon. Lady clarify what Labour's position is tonight on voting in favour of the revoke motion?

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Jenny Chapman Shadow Minister (Exiting the European Union)

Yes. We are treating tonight as the opportunity to vote for somethingâ€”a way to find whether there is a majority in the House of Commons for a particular deal as a way forward. We do not necessarily disagree with the proposition made by Joanna Cherry, but we will abstain on it this evening, while acknowledging that it is something that we might need to confront in the future.

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

Is that a whipped abstention or advisory?

Jenny Chapman Shadow Minister (Exiting the European Union)

Gosh, the hon. Lady invites me to make comments way above my station. I am sure she will understand that what happens with whipping is a matter for my Chief Whip.

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Does the Minister agree that it was the publication of the manifesto that was the tipping point for the Conservatives, and it was all going quite well until then, when things fell off a cliff? That was my experience.