

HOUSE OF COMMONS HANSARD

Leaving the EU

21 January 2019

Leaving the EU

15:35:00

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.]

Mr Speaker
Order.

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.

15:48:00

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab)

I thank the Prime Minister for giving me an advance copy of her statement. I join her in condemning the car bomb attack we have seen in Londonderry at the weekend, and I commend the emergency services and local community for their response. The huge achievement of the Good Friday agreement in reducing violence in Northern Ireland must never be taken for granted. It was an historic step forward, and we cannot take it for granted.

The Government still appear not to have come to terms with the scale of the defeat in this House last week. The Prime Minister seems to be going through the motions of accepting the result, but in reality she is in deep denial. The logic of that decisive defeat is that the Prime Minister must change her red lines, because her current deal is undeliverable, so can she be clear and explicit with the House—which of her red lines is she prepared to move on?

The Prime Minister's invitation to talks has been exposed as a PR sham. Every Opposition party politician came out of those meetings with the same response. Contrary to what the Prime Minister has just said, there was no flexibility and there were no negotiations—nothing has changed. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker

Order. The Prime Minister was heard and, when there was noise, I called for it stop. The same must apply to the Leader of the Opposition. No one in this Chamber will shout the right hon. Gentleman down. They need not bother trying, because they are wasting their breath.

Jeremy Corbyn

Thank you, Mr Speaker. However, I do welcome the commitment that the fee for EU citizens to apply for settled status will be waived.

The Prime Minister was fond of saying that this is the best possible deal on the table and that it is the only possible deal. However, our EU negotiating partners have been clear, saying that

“unanimously, the European Council have always said that if the United Kingdom chooses to shift its red lines in the future... to go beyond a simple free trade agreement... then the European Union will be immediately ready... to give a favourable response.”

The House voted to hold the referendum and to trigger article 50. There is a clear majority in this House to support a deal in principle and to respect the referendum result, but that requires the Prime Minister to face reality and accept that her deal has been comprehensively defeated. Instead, we now understand that the Prime Minister is going back to Europe to seek concessions on the backstop. What is the difference between legal assurances and concessions? What makes her think that what she tried to renegotiate in December will succeed in January? This really does feel like groundhog day.

The first thing the Prime Minister must do is recognise the clear majority in this House against leaving without a deal. She must rule out no deal and stop the colossal waste of public money planning for that outcome. Questions must also be asked of the Chancellor. He reassured businesses that no deal would be ruled out by the Commons, yet he sanctioned £4.2 billion to be spent on an option that he believes will be ruled out. Last week, the Foreign Secretary said that it was “very unrealistic” to believe that the House of Commons would not find a way to block no deal. Will the Prime Minister meet with her Chancellor and Foreign Secretary to see whether they can convince her to do what is in her power and rule out no deal? If she will not do that now, will she confirm to the House that, if an amendment passes that rules out no deal, she will implement that instruction? The Prime Minister agreed the backstop because of her pledge to the people of Northern Ireland to avoid a hard border, but no deal would mean a hard border in Ireland and would break the Prime Minister’s commitment. Is she seriously willing to accept a hard border?

Today heralds the start of a democratic process whereby this House will debate the amendments that will determine how we navigate Brexit. Of course, the Government tried to block us ever getting to this stage. They wanted no democratic scrutiny whatsoever. Labour has set out a proposal—I believe there may be a majority in this House for this—for a new comprehensive customs union with the EU that would include a say and a strong single market deal that would deliver frictionless trade and ensure no race to the bottom on workers’ rights or any other of the important regulations and protections that we currently have. As we have said consistently from the beginning, we will back amendments that seek to rule out the disaster of no deal and, as we have said, we will not rule out the option of a public vote. No more phoney talks. Parliament will debate and decide, and this time I hope and expect the Government to listen to this House.

The Prime Minister

The right hon. Gentleman says “no more phoney talks.” It would be nice just to have some talks with him on this issue. He makes lots of claims about what has been said in the talks that have been held so far but, actually, he does not know, because he did not turn up to those talks.

The right hon. Gentleman makes a great deal about the issue of no deal. He says that there is a consensus—a view across this House—that supports a deal in principle and wants to deliver on Brexit. That is exactly what I want to sit down and talk to him about. What we need to see is what it is that will secure the support of this House to enable us to leave the European Union with a deal. We are continuing to listen to groups across the House in order to find a way to secure that support.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about ruling out no deal. As I said in my statement, there are only two ways to ensure that a no deal does not happen: one is to revoke article 50, to reverse the decision of the referendum and to stay in the European Union, which would be a betrayal of the referendum decision in 2016; and the other way is to agree a deal with the European Union. It is

precisely to find a way to secure the support of this House for a deal that I am talking to Members across the House and that I want to talk to the right hon. Gentleman. From what he has said today, I hope that he will reconsider his decision not to attend those talks.

The right hon. Gentleman complains about the amount of money being spent. He talks about £4.2 billion being spent and how that money should be spent in other ways—I see that the Labour party has put out a press release saying the money should be spent in other ways. What he might not have noticed is that, actually, not all that £4.2 billion is being spent on no deal. If we stopped spending that money, we would not be prepared for a deal either, so he needs to recognise that, actually, the Government have to spend money to ensure that we are in a position whatever the outcome of the negotiations with the European Union, and whether we leave with a deal or in a no-deal circumstance.

I say once again to the right hon. Gentleman and to Members across the House who are concerned about no deal that that means we should leave with a deal and that what we need to find is a way to secure the support of this House for a deal. What is clear from the discussions that we have had so far is the wide variety of views held across the House on this issue.

When it comes to it, we all need to be able to look our constituents in the eye and say that we did the right thing by them, which is leaving with a deal to ensure that we deliver on the referendum and protect their jobs. That is what the Government are about, that is what we are working on and that is what we will deliver.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con)

As a supporter of the withdrawal agreement last week, I welcome the Prime Minister's acceptance of the need for change in the light of the result and her reassurance that she will not compromise on a permanently open border in Northern Ireland, and that therefore any discussions that she has with the hard right wing on the Irish backstop will not compromise the commitment to a permanently open border.

Will the Prime Minister also consider reaching out to those remainers who are not yet convinced of her agreement by at least relaxing—if she cannot do a U-turn—her normal rejection of a customs union? I do not see outside powers lining up to do trade agreements to compensate us for leaving Europe. Will she also consider relaxing her resistance to regulatory alignment with Europe? Regulatory alignment is not inconsistent with some tightening up, at least, of free movement of labour. I urge her to be flexible on every front, because there was a large majority against the proposal last week. There are probably more remainers who voted against her than there are Brexiteers, and she needs to reach out to those remainers.

The Prime Minister

My right hon. and learned Friend talks about some degree of regulatory alignment. He might not have noticed that, last summer, the Government put forward a proposal that included a degree of regulatory alignment, with a parliamentary lock on that regulatory alignment, and that the proposal raised concerns among a number of Members of this House. Some Members said that they did not consider the proposal to be the proper way forward.

I actually think that what we need in the future is a good trade relationship with the European Union. What we have in the political declaration is recognition that regulatory alignment and alignment with standards followed by the European Union are in balance with the question of checks at the border, and there is a spectrum of where that balance results. I have argued for

frictionless trade; there are those in the European Union who have not accepted the concept of frictionless trade, but who do accept the concept of reducing friction at the border as far as possible.

My right hon. and learned Friend also said that he did not see potential trade deals with the rest of the world. Today, I had lunch with the Prime Minister of New Zealand and one of the topics we discussed was precisely a future trade deal between the United Kingdom and New Zealand— [Interruption.] Just before Opposition Members start talking about the size of New Zealand, that is not just a trade deal with New Zealand, but United Kingdom membership in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP)

I thank the Prime Minister for the advance copy of her statement.

All of us share the Prime Minister's abhorrence and disgust at the bombing in Derry over the weekend. We are delighted that the efforts of the emergency services ensured that there was no loss of life. In the light of that incident, however, it was disturbing to see media reports this morning of at least the potential reopening of the Good Friday agreement. I welcome the Prime Minister's comments this afternoon, but will she confirm that she will seek neither to amend or to add to the Good Friday agreement in any way? Many of us remember the dark days that Northern Ireland went through. This weekend's attack was a frightening reminder of the fragility of the peace in Northern Ireland.

On the subject of talks, the Scottish National party entered willingly into talks with the Prime Minister last week, and we remain ready to engage in those talks on the basis that we can discuss pausing article 50, taking no deal off the table, and a people's vote. The Prime Minister talks about "no preconditions", but in the letters that have gone back and forth between the two of us, she insists that the United Kingdom must leave the European Union on 29 March. That is not consistent with a desire to discuss a people's vote. All preconditions must be taken off the table if we are to engage in meaningful dialogue. We know that the Prime Minister's strategy is now to run down the clock. There is no sign that she is interested in meaningful talks or meaningful change.

Prime Minister, take no deal off the table. She tells me that she has no desire for no deal. The Foreign Secretary has no desire for no deal. The Chancellor has no desire for no deal. The Leader of the Opposition has no desire for no deal. The SNP has no desire for no deal, and nor do the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru or the Greens. Let us stop this charade. To have a people's vote, we would have to extend article 50. It is not true that the only option is to revoke it—although we would welcome that. After last week's result—a defeat by 230 votes—the Prime Minister has not come here with fundamental change. This Government are a farce and an embarrassment, and their leadership is shambolic.

The Prime Minister must now step up. We must extend article 50 and end this impasse by bringing forward a second EU referendum. Do it for all sorts of reasons, but do it for the EU citizens living in the UK and now facing a registration scheme. I am grateful—I congratulate the Prime Minister—for the fact that fees have been waived for EU nationals, after a campaign led by the Scottish National party and our Government in Edinburgh, but it is shameful that people here, many of whom have been living here for decades, are being forced to register to stay in their own home. That is the fundamental fact. Not in our name. Where is the humanity of this?

We in Scotland have another choice. We did not vote for Brexit. We will not be dragged out of Europe by a Tory Government we did not vote for. We might not be able to save the UK, but we can save Scotland. We have an escape route from the chaos of Brexit: an independent Scotland.

Scottish independence will result in our country being a destination in Europe—a country at the heart of Europe, while the rest of the UK turns inward, isolated from its European neighbours. We want no part of it.

The Prime Minister

The right hon. Gentleman raises a number of issues. He talked about the Belfast agreement. As I said in my statement, this Government will not reopen the Belfast agreement. I have never considered doing that and I would not do it. We remain committed to the Belfast agreement and to maintaining our commitments under it.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about the question of no deal and running down the clock. We are not running down the clock. I brought to the House a deal that had been negotiated with the European Union, and the House has rejected that. I say once again to the right hon. Gentleman, as I did earlier to the Leader of the Opposition and to other Members, that it is very simple: you cannot wish away no deal. Either you stay in the European Union or you have a deal. I believe that it is right for us to leave the European Union because that was what people voted for in the referendum in 2016. If somebody does not want no deal, they have to be willing to agree a deal. The point about sitting down and talking with people across this House is to identify those issues on which it will be possible for us to make changes such that we can secure support around this House.

I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments about the announcement we made today about the fees for applications for citizens. I commend my hon. Friends the Members for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) and for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan), but the issue was also raised by other Members across this House.

Finally, I will say to the right hon. Gentleman, as I have said before and will continue to say, that for the Scottish National party to stand up and say that the best economic future for Scotland is to be outside the United Kingdom is to fly—[Hon. Members: “Hooray!”] Well, I have to say to every one of those Members who is cheering that thought that that is to fly in the face of economic reality, because the reality is—[Hon. Members: “Hooray!”]

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con)

I wonder whether the Prime Minister and, indeed, the Leader of the Opposition recognise that with just two months to go, the past week has shown that party politics and Westminster will not deliver a resolution on Brexit, because party politics is not the same as Brexit—it is separate from party politics—so the situation will not change and the House will not find a route forward. The Prime Minister talks about social cohesion, but surely the most divisive thing to do would be for Members to vote through her deal knowing that our communities simply do not want it. Is it not time for us all to be honest about the fact that Parliament has run out of road? We have been debating for two and a half years; we could debate for another two and a half years and we still would not reach a resolution on Brexit. The only people who can do that now, surely, are the British people.

The Prime Minister

I recognise the passion with which my right hon. Friend is campaigning on this particular issue, but she is assuming that it is not possible to reach an agreement that will secure the support of the House. The purpose of what we are doing at the moment in talking with parties and Back Benchers across this House is to find those issues—I have indicated issues in my statement—on which we can move and on which we can then find that support across the House. I believe it is right for us to continue to work for a deal to leave the European Union on 29 March, and for us to do so with a deal that has secured the support of this House.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab)

As a litmus test of the Prime Minister's flexibility, may I ask whether, if the House voted for membership of a customs union, for example, she would implement that decision?

The Prime Minister

Of course, the point about what we are doing in terms of this process is identifying those issues on which there is agreement across the House and on which the support of the House can be secured, and dealing with that with the European Union, but while also being faithful to the vote that was cast in the referendum. I believe that when we look at this issue, everybody should not only say, "Should we be leaving the European Union?", but recognise the reasons that lay behind the vote to leave the European Union and deliver on them.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con)

I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, particularly the part in which she said that EU nationals would have their fee waived—the whole House should recognise that—and also her acceptance that there is to be no change to the Belfast agreement, as I recognise completely that that would have opened a can of worms. As someone who did not support the agreement last week, I welcome the fact that she has also made it clear that she will now go forward and seek further change. In doing that, has she given further thought to the idea that, although she would remain absolutely in complete overall charge, she could insert a senior politician in those day-to-day negotiations to ensure that the political ramifications are taken carefully into consideration?

The Prime Minister

The negotiations at this stage are for politicians. Indeed, I will continue to have a role, as will the Secretary of State, as we go forward. What we need to ascertain is where we can ensure that we can secure the support of this House for a deal, and then take that forward to the European Union.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD)

I, too, welcome the fee waiver and the Prime Minister's willingness to engage in serious conversations, including about the merits and practicalities of a people's vote. May I ask a specific question? At the end of last week, the Secretary of State for Defence put 3,500 troops on Brexit standby. Will she clarify what their rules of engagement would be in the event that they face angry and violent demonstrators, and would they be armed?

The Prime Minister

It is of course right that the Government are taking the necessary contingency arrangements for the situation. The right hon. Gentleman will find that we are talking about those troops perhaps being able to relieve others who are undertaking roles such as the guarding of certain sites. That is what we are talking about.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con)

On the vital issue of UK tax policy, will my right hon. Friend also reconsider the provisions under which the United Kingdom will embrace EU state aid rules? With the European Commission supervising our Competition and Markets Authority, a veto will be given to the Commission over future tax incentives for investment developments such as free ports, airports, and industrial and enterprise zones.

The Prime Minister

If my hon. Friend looks back at the discussions that have taken place in the European Union, he will see that it has often been the United Kingdom that has been promoting fair competition, including

in relation to state aid rules. The question of those state aid rules and what will be included in any future trade agreement with the European Union is, of course, a matter that we look at in detail in the next stage of the negotiations.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab)

The Prime Minister seems to be talking as if she lost by 30 votes, not 230. She says that she wants to give Parliament a say on the political declaration and the future partnership but, to be honest, we have heard all that before. If she is serious, why not give Parliament a say before we finish the article 50 negotiations, not after? Why not put to Parliament some votes on her red lines, including on a customs union; otherwise, how can any of us believe a word she says?

The Prime Minister

As I have set out, the correct process, which is provided for under the legislation, is that there will be a neutral motion next week, which will be amendable. There will be Members across the House who wish to put down amendments that may reflect different views across the House in relation to different matters. We will, of course, continue to work on this, and when the Leader of the Opposition said that we were denying any democratic involvement in the process—[Interruption.] The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) says from a sedentary position that, yes, we were. Actually, no, even when we get the support of this House for a deal, there will still be the process of legislating to ensure that that deal is put in place, and this House will play a role in that legislation.

Boris Johnson (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con)

I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her decision to waive the registration fee for EU nationals—I think that that will be very welcome—and also on her determination now to go back to Brussels and fix the backstop, because that is the way forward. Will she confirm that, in so doing, she will now seek legally binding change to the text of that backstop and to the text of the withdrawal agreement itself?

The Prime Minister

We are exploring with Members across this House the nature of any movement on the backstop that would secure the support of this House. A number of options have been raised with us by Members across the House. We need to look at those, and to continue to talk with colleagues—with those who have raised the issue from the Government Back Benches, and those who have done so from the Opposition Benches, and particularly, obviously, our confidence and supply partners. There are a number of options; we will look to see what will secure the support of the House.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP)

May I join the Prime Minister in her words about the despicable and reckless attack in Londonderry at the weekend? It was carried out, of course, by the republican terrorists responsible for the murder of prison officers David Black in 2012 and Adrian Ismay in March 2016. These people have nothing to offer anyone in Northern Ireland, and are rejected right across the board.

On Brexit, I thank the Prime Minister for our meetings in recent days, the good engagement there has been, her recognition that core issues to do with the withdrawal agreement need to be sorted out, her willingness to try to reach a consensus, and the fact that she will go back to Brussels and ask for the necessary changes to be made. Can I take it from what she says that she is really serious about getting a consensus that can get this through the House, with the necessary legal changes to the withdrawal agreement?

The Prime Minister

Yes; I can give the right hon. Gentleman the assurance that, obviously, what I want to do is identify the way forward in dealing with the issues raised about the backstop. In my statement, I referenced the two key issues: its potential permanency, and the impact on the Union. I want to find a way to resolve those issues that will command support from this House.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con)

I thank the Prime Minister warmly for having listened to the concerns that I and other Members have raised on the issue of EU nationals. Given the good will that she has shown on the issue, will she remind the EU of its promises to reciprocate, and will she encourage the EU27 to remove any fees that its member states charge UK citizens?

The Prime Minister

My hon. Friend has raised a very important point. While it is important for us to give that reassurance to EU citizens here, we must also remember the EU citizens living in the EU27 member states; we will be pressing member states to give reciprocal commitments to UK citizens living there. A number of states have already committed to various ways in which they will provide protection of rights in a no-deal situation. We will continue to press them all to reciprocate.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab)

Last Wednesday, the Prime Minister said to the House that she would reach out to try to find a way forward on the crisis facing our country, but having listened to her statement, I am sorry to say that while her door may have been open, her mind has remained closed. She has rejected stopping us leaving the EU with no deal, even though she knows that no deal would be disastrous, and she has rejected remaining in a customs union, even though she knows it is an essential contribution to keeping an open border and maintaining friction-free trade. Last Wednesday, the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union published a report identifying a number of alternative ways forward, and recommended that they be put to the House in a series of indicative votes. Given that the Prime Minister has twice asked this afternoon, “Well, what will secure the support of the House?”, will she put those proposals to the vote?

The Prime Minister

The right hon. Gentleman knows that the Government will table a neutral motion next Tuesday; that is what is required under the legislation. That is an amendable motion. He again referenced the issue of rejecting no deal. As I said earlier, if people do not want no deal, there are only two ways to go. [Interruption.] It is no good hon. Members chuntering or shouting about this issue from a sedentary position. The sheer facts are that no deal will be taken off the table only either by revoking article 50, which turns back the result of the referendum—the Government will not do that—or by having a deal, and that is what we are trying to work out.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con)

Today, the shadow International Trade Secretary visited my constituency and said to the BBC:

“If there is a motion for a second referendum that is put before Parliament, our position as a party is that we would be supporting a public vote”.

Does the Prime Minister agree with me—and, I am sure, many Brexiteers in the north of England—that a second referendum would be a sell-out and cause a huge amount of harm to trust in politicians?

The Prime Minister

I do agree with my hon. Friend. A lot of people voted for the first time, or for the first time in many years, in the referendum in 2016, and I think their faith in politicians would be shattered if we failed to deliver on that vote. We have a duty to deliver on that vote in the referendum.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab)

The Prime Minister could reach out by relaxing her own self-imposed red lines, including thinking about other solutions such as staying in the customs union, which would deal with the backstop situation, but she seems intent on trying to get her dead deal through the House by playing chicken with her own Brexiteers and what she calls her confidence and supply partners. Will she, first, tell us that she really does want to reach out? Secondly, will she tell the House this: if we do amend the motion next Tuesday, will she respect that decision and put it into effect?

The Prime Minister

Of course, as I have said, it is possible for people to move amendments to the motion next Tuesday. We wanted to sit down with all parties and with different groups across the House, because there are different opinions on these issues in parties across this House, and find out where it will be possible to secure support for a deal to take that forward to ensure that we leave with a deal, but underpinning that, of course, is the importance of us delivering on the referendum. I believe that it is a duty for this Parliament to deliver on the referendum, to deliver Brexit, and to deliver a Brexit with a deal.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con)

I think a majority of voters in the referendum voted to leave and did not vote to sign a new comprehensive treaty binding us back into features of the EU. However, I think a big majority in the country would welcome a comprehensive free trade agreement, and use of article XXIV of the general agreement on tariffs and trade, while we are negotiating it, so when my right hon. Friend goes back to Brussels, will she table such a comprehensive free trade agreement and see if that breaks the logjam?

The Prime Minister

We have been looking at a free trade area—a free trade agreement—with the European Union. I just want to ensure that that is as ambitious as possible, and that is what is set out in the political declaration.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op)

The only thing we know for certain that people voted for in the referendum was to leave the EU—any other speculation is simply that. I repeat the question that my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) put earlier. Amazingly, the Prime Minister did not even mention the words “customs union” in her statement, but if this House voted either to remain in a customs union or to remain in EFTA or the EEA—all issues that were raised with her by her own MPs when she met them last week—will she adhere to that?

The Prime Minister

As I have said, obviously it will be for people to amend the motion that takes place next week and to see whether there is—[Interruption.] Can I just say to the hon. Lady that she is making some assumptions about the views of people across this House that have not been reflected by the discussions that we have had with Members across this House?

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con)

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to reject ruling out no deal. May I also say that for those of us like me who did not support the Government’s withdrawal agreement on the basis of the

backstop, if she can return from Brussels with something that is legally enforceable on this one area, I believe that she will carry most of the House with her?

The Prime Minister

I thank my right hon. Friend for his comment. It has been clear in the conversations we have had that, in terms of the specifics of the withdrawal agreement, the backstop is the issue. That is why we will be working hard to find a resolution of it.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC)

The Prime Minister knows that farming is integral to Welsh heritage. It is the beating heart of our rural economy. She must also understand that when she humours the idea of a no-deal Brexit, she freezes the heart's blood of our communities. When I meet Welsh farmers this week, on what grounds can I possibly assure them that Westminster defends their interests, given that the Prime Minister would evidently prefer no deal to a people's vote?

The Prime Minister

I have given my response on the issue of a people's vote or second referendum. After we negotiated the deal with the European Union, I was pleased to meet Welsh farmers, and they supported the deal and believed that it would be a good deal for them.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con)

Bearing in mind that the Leader of the Opposition has a reputation for meeting almost any organisation in the world, my constituents found it distasteful that he was not prepared to give up his time to meet the Prime Minister.

The House has given the Prime Minister instructions on a number of occasions. It has given the Government an instruction about holding a referendum and the date that we leave the European Union. Will she assure the House that she is doing her utmost to carry out those commands?

The Prime Minister

I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. I think that a number of people are surprised at the unwillingness of the Leader of the Opposition to meet me, as the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, when he has met other groups who do not have the national interest of this country at heart. As my right hon. Friend says, I am absolutely working to deliver on the instruction of this Parliament to leave the European Union on 29 March.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab)

I welcome the Prime Minister ruling out a second referendum, ruling out revoking article 50 and leaving on the table a WTO deal, whether managed or not. However, this is a remain Parliament—the majority of Members of this Parliament voted to remain. Does she agree that one way to show we are honouring what the people said is to speed up the progress of statutory instruments and legislation that need to get through this Parliament, so that we can get out on 29 March?

The Prime Minister

We have been laying statutory instruments. Getting statutory instruments through the House requires the usual channels to work together, and I am sure that those on the Labour Front Bench have heard the hon. Lady's interest in ensuring that those statutory instruments are able to get through the House.

Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con)

I welcome the Prime Minister's statement and support her determination to return to Brussels to secure changes, particularly to the backstop. Given what she said in her statement, may I urge her to rule out not only revoking article 50 but extending it? That would give businesses certainty and give the public some finality and reassurance that we will leave at the end of March, as promised.

The Prime Minister

I hope I can give my right hon. Friend the reassurance that I am working to find a deal that will secure the support of this House, such that we can and will leave the European Union on 29 March.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab)

It is now clear that the Prime Minister is counting on the House of Commons to rule out her red lines because she lacks the political authority to do so. Whether it is her dead deal, no deal, Norway or no Brexit, all the options that lie ahead are substantially different from what people were promised before the referendum. Given that, does she accept that there is not only a practical desire for a new referendum, to break the parliamentary deadlock, but a moral imperative, to ensure that it is the people who agree this country's future for generations to come?

Mr Speaker

I apologise that I did not have an immediate recall of the fact, but I wish the hon. Gentleman a happy birthday, and I observe—probably not for the first time or the last—that he seems to be a very youthful fellow.

The Prime Minister

I am happy to echo the many happy returns to the hon. Gentleman. When people voted in the referendum, they voted to leave the European Union and to ensure that free movement came to an end. There were those who voted to ensure that we had an independent trade policy, those who voted to ensure there was no remit of the European Court of Justice here in the United Kingdom and those who were concerned about the money sent every year to the European Union. It is important that this Parliament focuses on delivering on those.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con)

May I welcome the Prime Minister's statement, particularly her commitment to waive the fee required to be paid by European citizens and her commitment to reach out, cross-party, in pursuit of a Brexit deal? We have to honour that referendum. Does she agree with me that while the position of the Leader of the Opposition on Brexit is crystal clear—he is for leave up north and remain down south—many Back-Bench Labour colleagues who have very serious Brexit-voting constituencies are looking for a way to honour the referendum result with us? Will she support those talks in trying to find a moderate, sensible, orderly Brexit that can deliver for the majority of the British people?

The Prime Minister

I thank my hon. Friend for pointing out the inconsistencies in the position of the Leader of the Opposition on this particular issue. I am working to ensure that we can deliver and find such a way through that enables us to leave the European Union, to leave in a smooth and orderly way, to leave with a deal and to leave with a deal that is good for people across the whole of the United Kingdom.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind)

The Prime Minister is spending time reaching out to the House of Commons. Might we have a chance to reach out to her? During her statement, she made a number of assertions about what the opinions of this House were, but none of us knows what the opinions of this House are. When I table an amendment on indicative votes, might the Prime Minister make that Government policy so

that we can openly say—and our constituents see how we are voting, not how we are privately lobbying—what guidance we wish to give to the Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister

The right hon. Gentleman says I made a number of assertions in my statement. I made a number of comments that were based on the discussions that we have had so far with people from across this House, and we will continue to have those discussions. I am sure the right hon. Gentleman will do so; as I indicated earlier, there is a neutral motion that is amendable next week. However, the comments I made on the views of people across the House were based on the discussions that we have had. There are further discussions to be had.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con)

I would like to start by thanking the Prime Minister for offering to waive the £65 fee for EU citizens. I have a significant number in south Cambridge in my constituency, in the scientific and research communities, who will be relieved. However, what they will not be relieved about, and neither will I, is the fact that almost a week has gone by since the vote that was significantly lost in this place, yet we have no further information today about what the Government's position is. Surely we cannot go on for yet another week—that is wasting another two weeks in total—without some direction. Many Members in this House today have suggested a customs union, a people's vote or indicative votes, and the Prime Minister must commit to honouring one of those next week.

The Prime Minister

I set out in the statement that I made the issues that had come up during the discussions we have had with Members across this House. We will continue to have those discussions, and we are addressing the issues that I identified in my statement.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD)

I cannot believe in good conscience, knowing what the Prime Minister does about the devastating impact of no deal on our economy and on our security, that she is willing to let us leave the EU on that basis, yet she seems wedded to her red lines and still against a people's vote, which would have majority support if she backed it. With 67 days to go, the country deserves better than a massive game of chicken in the Tory party. When will the Prime Minister recognise she needs to move?

The Prime Minister

The hon. Lady talks about the issue of no deal. It is not good enough simply to say that somebody does not want no deal. You can only deliver not having no deal, as I have said, in two ways. There may be members of the Liberal Democrat party who have a different view from me on whether or not we should stay in the European Union—I believe we should honour the result of the referendum in 2016—but the only other way to ensure that we do not leave with no deal is to leave with a deal. It is pretty simple.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con)

I welcome the Prime Minister's recognition of the difficulties that have been raised about the backstop, so when she goes to Brussels, is she prepared to reopen the text of the withdrawal agreement in order to address many of the concerns that she has heard from many right hon. and hon. Members of the House with regard to the backstop?

The Prime Minister

What we are doing is talking to Members across the House to identify the various ways in which it would be possible to address the issue of the backstop. A number of options have been raised with us, and we are looking at all those options that have been raised.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op)

The Prime Minister says that there are only two ways to rule out a no-deal scenario. Why does she keep leaving out the option of a people's vote? It is true that that would involve seeking to extend article 50, but that would be for the very specific reason of the democratic consent of the British people rather than for no specific reason. On this issue, for both her and Labour party Front Benchers, is this not now a time for leadership and decision making, not prevarication and delay?

The Prime Minister

The decision was made in 2016 by the British people that we should leave the European Union. That is what we are delivering.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con)

The Irish Government have warned of the likely adverse economic and social impact on the Republic of a no-deal Brexit given the extent of that country's reliance on the British economy. Since the Irish backstop is probably the greatest impediment to a negotiated Brexit, will my right hon. Friend confirm that she maintains bilateral discussions with the Irish Government with a view to ascertaining, if at all possible, whether we can put forward an agreed position to the European Union?

The Prime Minister

We continue to talk to the Irish Government about their position in relation to the back-stop. The formal position, of course, is that the issue of customs across the border—dealing with the border—is an EU competence and therefore not an individual member state competence. But of course the position that the Irish Government take will be an important element of any consideration that the EU gives to any proposals that we put forward. We will continue to talk to them.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab)

The Prime Minister says that she wants to find a way forward but without allowing Parliament to vote on the different options, it is unclear how we can discover where consensus lies. Is it not the truth that any alternative to the Prime Minister's deal—whether a Norway-type model, a Canada-type model, a customs union or a people's vote—requires more time to negotiate or to go back to the country?

The Prime Minister says that extending article 50 is just putting off the decision, but the truth is that, by failing to build a consensus, the only way we can leave without a deal—now that her deal has been so roundly rejected by the House—is to extend article 50. Even at this late stage, will the Prime Minister now agree to do that?

The Prime Minister

We are continuing to work to see what deal would secure the support of the House such that we can leave the European Union with a deal. I also say to the hon. Lady that extending article 50 is not the great hope that she has—that somehow it solves everything. It defers the point at which the decision needs to be taken. There are limitations to what will be possible. This is not a decision for the United Kingdom alone and the EU would be highly unlikely to agree an extension to article 50 unless it had the prospect that an agreement, a deal, would be delivered. Talks to ensure that we can identify what deal can be delivered is what we are engaging in.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con)

I welcome my right hon. Friend's comments on Northern Ireland. She knows that if we were to follow the route proposed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood)

and did get to the point where we could trigger article 24 of the general agreement on tariffs and trade, we could continue for up to 10 years on zero tariffs and zero quotas. That would allay many of the fears of Opposition Members who are worried about high tariffs under so-called World Trade Organisation terms.

The Prime Minister

The question of GATT 24 is perhaps not quite as simple as some may have understood it to be. My right hon. Friend's expectation that it is simply possible to leave with no deal and immediately go into that situation does not actually reflect accurately the situation that the United Kingdom would find ourselves in. I continue to believe that leaving with a deal is the best way forward for us in leaving the European Union, and that is what we will continue to work for.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op)

Is the Prime Minister aware that this is supposed to be blue Monday, the most miserable day of the year in the United Kingdom? But, on this day, may I offer her warmth and cheer? After last week's resounding vote, she has showed her resilience and has been listening and talking to people. I urge her to carry that process on. In this Westminster village, things do not happen overnight, so will she persist? Otherwise, she will have misread the feeling of the House. We will be demanding a vote on the customs union; we will be demanding a vote on lengthening the process; and we will be demanding a vote on the people's vote. If she listens more, we can come to a conclusion in the House that will be good for the country and not a miserable one.

The Prime Minister

I assure the hon. Gentleman that we want to continue those discussions and conversations, and to continue to listen, to find what he indicated at the end of his question: a way forward that can be supported by the House and that will be good for everybody across the country.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con)

I am sorry, but this just is not good enough. This whole process is now turning our country into a laughing stock. The people of this country are worried and businesses have none of the certainty that they absolutely need in order to flourish. When the Prime Minister faced the possibility in December of losing the vote, she delayed it and said she would go over to the EU and sort out the backstop. We waited and nothing happened—nothing changed. Last week was a historic defeat. The House has spoken. It has rejected overwhelmingly the Prime Minister's deal, and here we are with another week of can-kicking. Is not the truth, Prime Minister, that nothing has changed?

The Prime Minister

We received further assurances from the European Union following the delay of the vote in December. Those assurances proved not to be sufficient for the House—the House rejected the deal, including those assurances. We are now working with people across the House to find the way forward that will secure a deal so that we can leave the European Union in a smooth and orderly way—a deal that is in the interests of people across this country.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP)

I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister has rejected the demands of the leader of the Labour party to raise the white flag in the negotiations by moving the date of leaving the EU from 29 March. Is she disappointed that, even before she has put forward any plan B, the Irish Government and the Irish Vice-President of the European Parliament have rejected any suggestion that the backstop will be changed? Does she therefore accept that, in the face of such intransigence, we need to adhere to what the people of the United Kingdom have asked for and leave on 29 March?

The Prime Minister

It is important that we deliver on the vote that took place in the referendum in 2016. We will continue to talk to the Irish Government because I believe that the best way forward for all of us is to be able to leave with a deal. We recognise the commitments that we have made to the people of Northern Ireland for no hard border. I would hope we will be able to find a way through that can secure the support of the House and the European Union, such that we are able to leave with a good deal.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con)

I thank my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for her statement and for her willingness to engage with those who are willing to engage with her. I congratulate her on the vote last week that she won, namely the vote of confidence, which she won on the basis that she would not engage in preparations for a second referendum, and on the basis that we either negotiate a successful deal for which the House of Commons votes or leave on World Trade Organisation terms.

Will the Prime Minister take the advice of J.P. Morgan, which stood side by side with remain in the referendum, but which now warns that the extension of article 50 would be the worst of all possible worlds and

“death by a thousand cuts”

for the British economy? Will she ensure that we avoid that extension?

The Prime Minister

I had not seen that comment from J.P. Morgan, but I have been clear that it is important that we deliver on the referendum vote and leave the European Union on 29 March.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op)

The Prime Minister said earlier that a public vote could damage social cohesion by undermining faith in our democracy. The public already believe that our politics is broken because of how she and her Government have thus far handled this process over the last years. Will she today acknowledge that there can be nothing more democratic than a vote that gives the entire country a final say on her deal?

The Prime Minister

Many, many people up and down this country have a very simple view: a vote took place in 2016 and the result of that was to leave the European Union. Many people now—not only those who voted to leave at the time but many who voted to remain—feel it is incumbent on Government and Parliament to deliver on the result of that vote.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con)

Reports from Warsaw suggest that the Polish Foreign Secretary, Mr Czaputowicz, is taking the lead in trying to help the United Kingdom to break the impasse, by suggesting a definitive time for the backstop. Will the Prime Minister share with us some of the helpful things that the Polish Government are doing to help us, and encourage others to follow suit?

The Prime Minister

I look forward to exploring in more detail the proposals of the Polish Foreign Minister on the particular issue of dealing with the backstop. We have always worked well with the Polish Government on these and other matters in the European Union’s Council, and we want to continue to have that very close relationship with Poland after we leave the European Union.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab)

On the Union, may I suggest that seeking public consent for a Brexit that looks very different from the one sold to the public in 2016 would do far less damage than tearing Scotland and Northern Ireland out of the Union in a botched Brexit against their will? So may I ask the Prime Minister, is her first loyalty to her party or to the country?

The Prime Minister

Every decision that I have taken, I have taken because I believe that it is right in the national interest. I genuinely believe that we should, as a Government and as a Parliament, deliver on the result of the referendum in 2016. I think that is our duty—it is very simple.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con)

Twelve days ago, the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) warned that, in her view, a no-deal Brexit could be used by those who want to agitate for a border poll, trying to force Northern Irish people to vote to leave the UK. Does the Prime Minister agree that that is a risk, and will she confirm that no deal is not her top priority or, indeed, the priority of the Government?

The Prime Minister

The position of the Government is very clear: we want to leave the European Union with a deal—we want to leave with a good deal. The deal that we negotiated has been rejected. That is why we are asking questions across the House, and talking and listening to people about what would secure the support of this House that will enable us to leave with a good deal on 29 March.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab)

The Prime Minister ruled out a second referendum on the grounds that such an action would undermine social cohesion in this country. Does she not accept that that displays an incredibly jaundiced view of the character of the British people?

The Prime Minister

No, it does not. If the right hon. Gentleman looks at the decision that was taken in 2016, many people—17.4 million—voted for us to leave the European Union. It was the highest turnout in a poll for some considerable time. Many people voted for the first time for many years, if not for the first time at all, in that referendum. If we were to go back to them to say that we were not delivering on the result of that referendum, that would indeed damage people's faith in politics—it would damage our democracy.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con)

As today is blue Monday, the gloomiest day of the year, will the Prime Minister cheer up at least 17.4 million people, and probably many more, by confirming that beyond a shadow of doubt this country will have left the European Union by 30 March?

The Prime Minister

My right hon. Friend has regularly asked me that question, and my answer has not changed. First, I believe that it is our duty to deliver leaving the European Union and, as he knows, there is a date in legislation for us to leave—it is 29 March. That is the end of the two-year article 50 process.

Dame Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op)

Last week, the Prime Minister suffered a major defeat. Today, she has not come to the House with any answers. She claims she wants to have extensive discussions on a variety of issues both inside

and outside this House, yet meaningful discussions need time, so why is she refusing to call for an extension of article 50?

The Prime Minister

There were two elements in my statement on the question of discussions: the discussions we are holding to find a deal that can secure the support of the House and the discussions we will be having in the next stage of negotiations not just within the House, but outside the House. It is important for us to work to find a deal that enables us to leave on 29 March.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con)

Does the Prime Minister agree that Members should be mindful that most of us were elected on manifestos that promised to honour the referendum result?

The Prime Minister

My hon. Friend makes an important point—in one sense, it is a very simple point, but it is very important—which is that 80% of the votes cast at the general election last year were cast for parties that had in their manifestos a commitment to respect and deliver on the referendum result and ensure we leave the EU, and that is what the Government are doing.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab)

The words “customs union” were not on the ballot paper in the EU referendum. Can the Prime Minister name a UK manufacturer who has said that the benefits of free trade agreements around the world, even if they were agreed quickly, would outweigh the costs of our leaving the European customs union?

The Prime Minister

The position that I believe will be of great benefit to manufacturers and our economy is our having a good trading relationship with the EU and the freedom to negotiate those trade deals around the rest of the world, and that is what we have been working for.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con)

How is remaining in a customs union consistent with the decision of the British people to be no longer subject to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice?

The Prime Minister

My right hon. Friend raises an important issue. I believe one reason people voted to leave the EU was that they wanted to leave the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, and that is what we want to deliver.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP)

The Prime Minister said that EU citizens in the UK will be able to stay and continue to access in-country benefits and services on roughly the same terms as now. Is she aware that my constituents and many of those of my hon. Friends have been finding it difficult to access universal credit on the basis that they have not been here long enough? Will she look into this, because it seems that EU citizens are already being denied their rights? It is a new hostile environment for EU nationals.

The Prime Minister

The scheme that the Home Office has set out is very clear about the rights that EU citizens would have, and the withdrawal agreement, which I think the hon. Lady voted against, also sets out clearly the rights of EU citizens upon our leaving the EU, but I will ensure that the relevant Department looks at the issue she raises.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con)

I thank the Prime Minister for saying that she will go back to the EU to discuss the backstop in particular. When she goes, will she take with her a copy of the House of Lords report from March 2017 that says if we leave without a deal we do not owe it any money, because that may make it more willing to talk?

The Prime Minister

My right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General responded to the issue of the House of Lords report in last week's debate. He was very clear that the House of Lords report had looked at a particular aspect of law but had itself recognised there might be obligations under other aspects of international law. The advice is clear that there would be obligations on us to pay in a no-deal situation, and I believe that we should be a country that respects its legal obligations.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab)

I listened carefully to what the Prime Minister said about social cohesion and division in our country. We all worry about the far right and the threat it poses to our country, and history shows that a resurgence of the far right usually follows an economic depression, which is why avoiding no deal at all costs is essential. Does she not agree in any event that it would be wholly wrong to allow any group in society to threaten and intimidate us into not following our democratic processes and into not having votes, that this would clearly be unacceptable and that anyone engaging in such threats, violence and intimidation should feel the strong arm of the law come down on them?

The Prime Minister

There is an important issue relating to some of the behaviour that we have seen. Members of this House have been victims of it, but others also have been on the receiving end of aggressive behaviour because they appear to hold a different view from those held by other people. It is important that we are able to have our debates on these issues—not just in the House, but in public—with dignity and respect. Yes, people will want to put their positions passionately, but there must be respect for the right of others to hold a different view, and to hold that view equally passionately. However, I also believe it is important, when the House has given a decision to the British people in a referendum, that we deliver on that.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con)

I thank my right hon. Friend for listening to concerns expressed by a number of Conservative Members and for her recognition that there must be changes in the backstop, but will she also confirm that the aspects of our future relationship set out in the political declaration, which also cause some concern, are not legally binding, and can be addressed and changed in the course of the subsequent negotiation?

The Prime Minister

The political declaration sets out the framework for the negotiations in the future, but that has to be negotiated into legal text and, as I am sure my right hon. Friend knows, there are elements within that text which have not identified absolutely a particular position. In response to an earlier question, I referred to the balance between checks at borders and regulatory alignment. That is obviously a matter for the future negotiations.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab)

The Prime Minister has set out today, and on many occasions in recent weeks, her implacable opposition to any kind of public vote to establish public consent to the terms on which we leave the European Union through a referendum. Is she as implacably opposed to a general election?

The Prime Minister

If the right hon. Gentleman had heard the speech that I made last week in the no-confidence debate, he would know that I made it absolutely clear that I do not believe that a general election is in the national interest at this time.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con)

May I return to issues concerning the World Trade Organisation? One of the things that will need to be sorted out in connection with the question of a no-deal Brexit is what will happen in relation to some of the “most favoured nation” clauses. If the Prime Minister were to put up no tariffs, barriers or checks to EU goods at all after 29 March—which would be very helpful in ensuring that there was no change in free-flowing trade from our side—that might provoke MFN challenges at the WTO.

What assessment have the Government made of the relative merit of carrying on with trade as it currently is in such a scenario, vis-à-vis the risk of WTO challenges? Those challenges would of course not be heard for 18 months, and any infraction could not be retrospective. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it may well be worth while—as long as the study is done—to pursue that course of simply keeping the border open in the event of a no-deal Brexit?

The Prime Minister

I know—given his previous ministerial position and his interests—that my right hon. Friend has considered this issue with great care. However, it is not simply a question of the tariffs that we set for items going across our border. Questions of the WTO requirements in relation to customs declarations at the border, and other issues which are referred to in the political declaration, such as issues relating to data, are also relevant to this matter.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab)

If the House votes to take time to consider options other than those that the Prime Minister has been presenting to us, will she accept that that is not an attack, but a sign of the strength of our parliamentary democracy?

The Prime Minister

If the hon. Lady is referring to the issue of an extension of article 50—

Helen Goodman
indicated dissent.

The Prime Minister

The hon. Lady shakes her head.

Helen Goodman

I am referring to Standing Order No. 14.

The Prime Minister

But the only way in which it is possible to ensure there is more time in the negotiations with the EU to find that resolution would be if article 50 were extended. Article 50, as I have indicated, cannot be extended simply by the decision of this House alone; it is a matter that has to be agreed by the European Union as well. It is very clear that it would not be likely to allow that extension unless it were clear that there was a deal or agreement that was coming forward as a result of that. As I have said, I believe we should be leaving the EU on 29 March, and the discussions I and others have

been holding with Members across this House are aimed exactly at being able to do that with a deal that secures the support of this House.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con)

I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and the extraordinary work she is doing to shape our exit from the EU. May I just say, in response to the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), who questioned the Prime Minister's commitment to our country, that nobody on this side of the House, and very few people outside, would do that?

Can I press my right hon. Friend? If the leader of the Labour party continues to refuse to work collaboratively with the Government, that action effectively makes no deal the more likely outcome in March. Should he not just come clean and admit that?

The Prime Minister

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I said, the only way in which it is possible—other than staying in the EU, which we will not do—to ensure that no deal is off the table is to agree a deal. I gave an offer—it remains open to the Leader of the Opposition—to engage in talks with us. They were precisely talks about ensuring we can have a deal so we do not leave with no deal.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP)

You could be forgiven for watching these proceedings and thinking that the Northern Irish backstop is the only issue that is preventing people from supporting this agreement, but last week when I visited the Glasgow Kelvin College campus in Easterhouse people expressed major concern about the Erasmus scheme and the lack of clarity for them. Not referring to universities, what reassurance can the right hon. Lady give to colleges in this country about the future after Brexit?

The Prime Minister

If the hon. Gentleman looks at the political declaration, he will see that we have referenced those aspects of working—continuing to be able to work collaboratively with colleges and universities across the European Union through initiatives like Horizon and looking at the possibility of extending Erasmus. Those are referenced in the political declaration, but they cannot be part of a legally agreed text until after we have left the EU.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con)

I warmly welcome the Prime Minister's announcement reassuring over 3 million European nationals in the UK about having their fees for registration rights waived. Although the European Commission's line on not being able to determine member states' views on this is well known, the European Parliament's Brexit co-ordinator has stressed that reciprocity for British citizens in the EU is essential, so will my right hon. Friend ensure that the Government hold them to that pledge? Also, I do not understand what all the discussion about customs union today is about, because the customs union and the relationship on trade and investment comes at the second stage. What we are trying to get over the line is the withdrawal agreement.

The Prime Minister

My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The European Parliament were very clear that citizens' rights was their key concern in this withdrawal agreement. We have discussed those with them and I will continue to press them to press member states, and press member states individually to reciprocate on the issue of citizens' rights. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: there are two parts to the deal that was negotiated—the withdrawal agreement, which is the legal text about how we withdraw from the EU, and the political declaration on our future relationship. Setting that into legal text is indeed a matter for the next stage of negotiations.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab)

The Prime Minister is against the people's vote because she says there is not a majority in this place and it would undermine social cohesion. If she wants to know the majority in this place, why does she not test it? May I put it to her that, because she is hardly Mystic Meg when it comes to understanding the will of this place, it would be a good thing for her to do? Also, there is only a very small minority—an ultra-small minority of very, very right-wing people—who are trying to undermine social cohesion in this country in order to prevent a people's vote. When did the Tory party start running away from fascists rather than standing up to them?

The Prime Minister

I have to say that I think that comment was beneath the hon. Gentleman. Let me explain again why I say what I do about a second referendum. It is very simple. Throughout my political career, when I have seen other countries hold second referendums on decisions relating to Europe because the first one did not come out in the way the politicians of the time wanted it to, it was hugely important that people accepted the result of the first one. This House overwhelmingly voted for our referendum and overwhelmingly voted to trigger article 50, and I believe that we should follow through on those decisions and deliver on the vote that people took in the referendum in 2016.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con)

I suggest that those remainers trying to hijack Government business and the Brexit process believe that people did not know what they were voting for when they voted to leave the EU, but they now seem to be suggesting that MPs did not know what they were doing when they voted to trigger article 50, given that the WTO was always the backstop. Parliament cannot become the Executive and the referendum result must be respected by Parliament. Will the Prime Minister therefore confirm, for the sake of absolute clarity on the Benches opposite, not only that we will be leaving on 29 March—she has made that very clear—but that, if the negotiations fail, we will be leaving on WTO terms: terms on which we profitably trade with the rest of the world?

The Prime Minister

We will be leaving the European Union on 29 March. I believe we shall be leaving on 29 March with a good deal. We are working across the House to ensure that we can deliver in negotiation with the European Union and that we can find a deal that actually secures the support of this House. I believe that leaving with a good deal is the best outcome for the UK.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP)

The Prime Minister knows that Scotland is different. Scotland overwhelmingly rejected this Tory Brexit and increasingly wants nothing to do with its impending disasters. Surely at some point she must accept that, among all the options we have to consider, Scotland must be asked whether it wants to be part of this ugly, self-defeating, isolated Brexit Britain, or whether it should determine its own relationship with the EU as an independent nation.

The Prime Minister

We talk about honouring referendums, and actually there was a referendum in Scotland in 2014 which determined that Scotland should remain in the United Kingdom. That should be honoured by all of us in this House.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con)

In her welcome statement, the Prime Minister said that

“the Government will consult this House on their negotiating mandate, to ensure that Members have the chance to make their views known”.

When she brings the agreement and the political declaration, in whatever form, back to the House, will she consider including those words in the motion for approval?

The Prime Minister

I will certainly look at my hon. Friend’s suggestion. Obviously, when there is a deal that will secure the support of the House, there will be a technical issue about how that motion will need to be worded such that it is clear and meets the requirements of the legislation. I think he is looking for reassurance that the agreement to enable Parliament to have a voice in that negotiating mandate is not simply words from the Dispatch Box and that it is actually delivered on.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab)

Another week gone, and still no plan B. There will be no plan B next week, and probably none the week after. The clock is ticking away. Last week, the Attorney General said:

“If we do not legislate for that legal certainty, as a matter of law alone, thousands of contracts, transactions, administrative proceedings and judicial proceedings in the European Union and this country will be plunged into legal uncertainty.”—[Official Report, 15 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 1024.]

Even if the Prime Minister’s deal had been agreed to last week, at the rate we are going she stands no chance of getting all of that legislated for and providing legal certainty by 29 March. Please, please, please just own up: you are going to have to delay 29 March.

The Prime Minister

Obviously the Attorney General set out that position, and that legal certainty would be provided by the provisions in the withdrawal agreement that was negotiated with the European Union. The vast majority of the withdrawal agreement relates to those sorts of issues, and what I am working for now is to ensure we can get agreement on those aspects of the withdrawal agreement that people have raised concerns about, such that we can leave with a good deal and ensure that we give that legal certainty to all those businesses outside. In order to do that, however, it will be necessary at some point for this House to support a deal with the European Union.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con)

It has been reported that President Macron is going to use the threat of the Irish backstop to force the UK into giving French fishing vessels continued access to UK waters. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that we are leaving the common fisheries policy on 29 March? Will she also confirm that she will say, “Non, non, non” to President Macron?

The Prime Minister

I can confirm that we are leaving the CFP, that we will indeed become an independent coastal state and that we will be negotiating access to our waters. Of course, for President Macron to suggest that he could use the backstop as a means of requiring us to give access to French fishermen would be counterproductive, because French fishermen would not have any access to our waters under the backstop.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

I am sure my views on this matter are well known to the House, so I choose my words with care. A week ago, I asked the Prime Minister what, in the event of the UK leaving the EU, Government

fund would replace the European structural funds that have been such a benefit to the highlands for many years. In her answer, she said “the shared prosperity fund”. Will the Prime Minister give me an assurance today that the shared prosperity fund will find its way to the needy highlands and islands and not be—how shall I put it?—creamed off for cherished projects in the south of Scotland or near Edinburgh or Glasgow?

The Prime Minister

I will leave the hon. Gentleman to debate the issue of which parts of Scotland require funding. The point of the shared prosperity fund is to ensure that we tackle inequalities between communities. We want a focus on raising productivity, which is important across our country, and we will consult widely on the fund, including the details of how it will operate and its priorities, which will be announced following the spending review.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con)

All Conservative Members stood on a manifesto in 2017 that said on page 36 that

“we continue to believe that no deal is better than a bad deal for the UK.”

Given that this House decided by 230 votes last week that the Government’s proposal was a bad deal, if the Prime Minister goes back to Brussels and the EU is not prepared to give a good deal, will she honour that Conservative manifesto commitment and leave on 29 March with a clean, global Brexit?

The Prime Minister

Of course, we stood on that manifesto, and I have repeatedly said at the Dispatch Box that no deal was better than a bad deal, but I also believe that it is better for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union with a good deal. I am working with others from across the House to see what will secure the support of this House such that we leave the European Union and that we leave with a deal.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab)

The Prime Minister has said that there is no majority in this House for a second referendum. She may be right, but there is clearly a majority against leaving with no deal. Is she saying to the House that, rather than provide extra time in order to secure a deal that can pass through this House, she will crash us out with no deal on 29 March?

The Prime Minister

If the House does not want to leave with no deal, the House must come together and agree the deal that will secure the support of the House, and that is what we are working on.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con)

The Leader of the Opposition has told us that he would rule out no deal, but he has also said that he would rule in a second referendum. It seems that his support for unilateral disarmament is rather similar to his approach to Brexit negotiations. I thank my right hon. Friend for, by contrast, sticking to her guns.

The Prime Minister

I thank my hon. Friend for pointing that out. It is very important that the Government deliver for people and that we continue to deliver. It is interesting that, although the shadow Secretary of State for International Trade, the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), has referred to the

Labour party's position on a second referendum, I do not think the Leader of the Opposition has identified what he believes in relation to a second referendum.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD)

The Prime Minister said earlier that extending article 50 would just be deferring the moment of decision, but does she not agree that in the current situation, when there is no consensus in the House, it is very difficult to know what the will of the people is now, two and a half years down the road and amid this chaos, lack of leadership and indecision? Perhaps deferring the moment of decision is exactly what we need, so she should consider extending article 50.

The Prime Minister

The people made clear their will that we should leave the European Union. It is this House that now needs to identify how we can leave the European Union with a deal that will benefit people across the United Kingdom.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con)

My constituents in Dover and Deal who voted leave and remain alike have been in contact to express their concern that Members of this House may be engaged in unconstitutional games and parliamentary tricks to delay Brexit or stop it altogether. Will the Prime Minister confirm that, whatever happens, we will leave the European Union on 29 March and that she will always align with the people against anyone in this House to ensure that the people's will and the referendum vote are carried through?

The Prime Minister

I absolutely agree that we should be delivering on leaving the European Union, and we have been clear that that will be on 29 March. Those who wish to use parliamentary procedure to try to reverse the vote of the British people need to think very carefully about what they are trying to do, because there is absolutely no doubt in my mind that this Parliament voted for that referendum and voted to trigger article 50, and that therefore this Parliament should deliver on those votes.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab)

With the clock ticking, and for us all to come together to agree a deal that delivers on the promises made in the 2016 referendum campaign and that rules out the disaster of no deal, why exactly will not the Prime Minister hold indicative votes in this House to establish what the will of the House actually is?

The Prime Minister

Once again, the position is set out very clearly in legislation. The Government will bring a neutral motion to this House, and that motion will be amendable. We are working to see what deal will secure the support of the House. Of course, it has to be a deal that we can negotiate with the European Union, because a deal, by definition, has to be agreed by both sides. I believe that the right thing for this Government to do is to listen to Members across the House and to work to find a deal that will secure support.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con)

Does the Prime Minister agree that enforcing a second referendum would be the most arrogant thing that this Parliament could ever do? It would be totally wrong to say to the people effectively, "You got it wrong last time. Now go away and have another try." That referendum result was not some kind of "take note" memo; it was an instruction to this House. The instruction is just as valid today as it was the day after the referendum.

The Prime Minister

My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This House did not say to the British people, “Have this vote and we might think about whether we agree with it and will deliver on it.” We said, “It is your decision.” The Government campaigned for remain, but the Government leaflet was clear that the result would be respected, and that is exactly what this Parliament should do.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab)

The Prime Minister says that she wants to reach out to civil society and trade unions. May I gently suggest to her that, over the next week, she reaches out to the Musicians Union—I declare my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests—to find out what it thinks a future after Brexit should look like for touring musicians? I also suggest that she listens to remainers in general and tries to do her best to take into account what they think so that she can try to heal this very divided country.

The Prime Minister

That is precisely why I believe that it is important that we have a deal that will secure the support of this House—a deal that will respect the referendum, but in a way that protects people’s jobs, gives them certainty and protects our Union.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con)

Is it not the case that four fifths of Members voted to trigger article 50, and that in doing so, they consciously—or perhaps semi-consciously in some cases—accepted that no deal would be the default option if we did not leave with a deal? If hon. Members have now changed their mind, should they not be open about that and say that they now want a second referendum or to ditch Brexit altogether? If they do not want that, and they do want an orderly Brexit and to prevent no deal, is not the only course open to them to agree a deal?

The Prime Minister

My right hon. Friend sets out the position with impeccable logic. It is indeed correct that four fifths of this House voted to trigger article 50—for a two-year process that ends on 29 March this year. If people want us to leave with a deal, they have to agree a deal.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP)

This Government have brought us austerity, the benefit freeze, the two-child policy and the rape clause, all the while cutting tax for the richest in our society, yet the Prime Minister has the temerity to claim that it is a fundamental act of democracy—a second referendum—that will undermine social cohesion in the UK. What evidence does she have for that assertion?

The Prime Minister

The hon. Gentleman says this Government brought austerity. This Government had to respond to the significant financial and economic crisis left to us by the Labour Government when we took over in 2010. It is this Government who are bringing an end to austerity, and ensuring that our debt will come down and that we maintain lower taxes. I notice that the Scottish Government have been increasing taxes on people in Scotland. They might want to think very carefully about that before talking about impacts on people.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con)

I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement, particularly her reference to the backstop. I believe that if the EU was prepared to be somewhat more flexible on that, it could open the door to an acceptable agreement. In recent days, I have been contacted by constituents who are concerned that further opening of the negotiations could weaken our position on freedom of movement. My right

hon. Friend has always been very firm on that issue. May I invite her to reaffirm her determination to ensure that there is no relaxation of the current position?

The Prime Minister

I am happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance. I have always said that I believe that the desire to bring an end to free movement was one of the things that led to many people voting to leave the European Union. This Government will deliver on that—there will be an end to free movement.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab)

In a radio interview yesterday, the Solicitor General said that he thought that agreement on a customs union would provide a way to unify this House. What is the Prime Minister's response to her Solicitor General?

The Prime Minister

My response is that the discussions we have been having across the House suggest that opinions on this matter and on what to drive forward are more varied than a simple solution such as the one that the hon. Gentleman suggests.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con)

I am sure that hon. Members across the House welcome my right hon. Friend's commitment to maintaining workers' rights and environmental standards. Does she agree that we can be more ambitious and lead the way on that, but only if we leave the EU with a deal?

The Prime Minister

My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I believe that we can lead the way around the world on these issues, but to do that, we have to leave the European Union with a good deal and then have the freedom to set very high standards.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP)

I thank the Prime Minister for her statement and for her endeavours. A poll in Northern Ireland just last week shows that 70% of Unionists are against another vote on leaving the EU. Some 71% of Unionists want Brexit and 66% are against the withdrawal agreement, which was so heavily defeated in this House just last week. Will the Prime Minister confirm that she will not ignore the opinion of Unionists, that the backstop will have to be removed, and that Northern Ireland will continue to be an integral part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, on the same basis as England, Wales and Scotland?

The Prime Minister

Obviously it is my position and the Government's position that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, and we want Northern Ireland to continue to be able to be that integral part of the United Kingdom. It is right that we deliver on the vote to leave the European Union. The backstop has been identified as a key issue and we will continue to work with the hon. Gentleman and his right hon. and hon. Friends, and with others across this House who have raised this issue, to find a way through that enables us to secure a deal.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con)

I congratulate the Prime Minister on her determination to leave the EU on 29 March. Does she agree that this has become a matter of trust between the people and politicians, and that if we fail to deliver and leave on that date, that trust will be damaged irreparably?

The Prime Minister

I agree with my hon. Friend that these decisions are about matters of trust, which is why I have been concerned about the proposals for a second referendum. I think that a second referendum would damage that trust between the people and politicians.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab)

Brexit is a fantasy based on lies. Nothing about Brexit will make our constituents' lives any better. When will the Prime Minister start standing up for what is right and stop running down the clock? When will she rule out no deal and put this decision back to the people?

The Prime Minister

I say very gently to the hon. Lady that I believe she stood in the general election on a manifesto that committed to deliver Brexit, and that is what we are doing.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con)

I warmly welcome the Prime Minister's announcement about the waiving of visa fees, but will she assure us that the Home Office will not seek to recoup the cost by jacking up visa and asylum costs elsewhere? In response to some of the points made by Opposition Members, does she agree that it is just not compatible for any Member or party that undertook to respect the referendum result in their 2017 manifesto now to claim that they support a second vote that includes the option completely to disrespect the first one by overturning it?

The Prime Minister

I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. First, we will ensure that, as I have said, those fees will be waived, and those who have already applied or are applying during the pilot will have their fees reimbursed. My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the point in relation to a second referendum. It is so important that we show people that they can have trust in their politicians by delivering on the decision that they took in 2016.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab)

I do not doubt that the Prime Minister has tried her level best to secure an acceptable agreement, but she has clearly failed—the scale of her defeat last week was monumental—largely because she has been constrained by the national economic interest. Following that failure, surely it would now be right to offer the people a vote.

The Prime Minister

We agreed to give the people a vote and that vote took place in 2016. The people voted to leave the European Union, and this Parliament should accept, as the Government are doing, the importance of delivering on the vote that people gave in the 2016 referendum.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con)

When the withdrawal agreement was made with the EU, President Macron almost immediately made a statement contrary to the text of the agreement, saying that unless the UK agreed to allow EU fishing vessels to have the same access to our waters as they have now, talks on a wider trade deal would fail, leaving the UK in the backstop. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that that was an empty threat, that when she goes back to the EU she will stand firm on her commitment that we will leave the common fisheries policy, and that future access to our fishing waters will not be tied to a deal on trade?

The Prime Minister

Yes, I can give my hon. Friend that reassurance. In fact, it is clear in the political declaration that the issue of access to fishing waters is separate from the issue of market access for trade. I am also

clear that we will ensure that we leave the common fisheries policy and become an independent coastal state, and that we will be negotiating access to our waters in the future.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP)

Before Christmas, the Prime Minister assured me in the House that there were adequate civil servants in each Government Department dealing with Brexit, so will she explain why, according to a written parliamentary answer, the Department of Health and Social Care has 385 fewer civil servants than it had on 23 June 2016? What does that mean for future medical supplies in the event of a no-deal Brexit?

The Prime Minister

The two points that the hon. Gentleman raises are not linked. On medical supplies, the Department of Health and Social Care has been working with pharmaceutical companies and others to ensure that arrangements are in place so that medical supplies will be available in the event that we leave with no deal. The Government's position is that we want to leave with a deal. We are working on finding a deal that will secure the support of this House.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con)

Forgive my voice, Mr Speaker. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, if we have to leave with no deal, we are likely to find a far more conciliatory EU after we have left than we are finding now while we are in it?

Mr Speaker

I am sorry to learn of the hon. Gentleman's indisposition, but I hope that he will take it in the right spirit if I say that there is a husky intelligibility about him.

The Prime Minister

I am not sure whether it is appropriate for me to comment on my hon. Friend's husky intelligibility at this point, Mr Speaker.

May I say to my hon. Friend that it is important for this country to continue to have good relations with the European Union once we have left? Working to leave with a deal that is agreed by both sides will help in that regard. People have focused on the backstop in the withdrawal agreement and often on the trade aspects, but the security aspects—the arrangements with the European Union to enable us to continue to work together on matters such as dealing with terrorism and organised crime—will be important in the future.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op)

Time marches mercilessly on towards 29 March. Given the current trajectory, it is not beyond the realms of possibility that we will end up in a situation on 28 March when the Prime Minister will have failed to agree a deal, but also failed to negotiate an extension to article 50. She will then be faced with two options: to see the United Kingdom crash out with no deal; or to revoke article 50. Only one of those in that situation would be in the national interest, so which choice will she take?

The Prime Minister

I am working to ensure that we can agree a deal with the European Union that will secure the support of this House such that we leave on 29 March, but do so with a deal.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con)

Does the Prime Minister agree that the first rule of politics is to turn up?

The Prime Minister

Yes, I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I hope that there are those across this House who will take that message to heart and act on it.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab)

Let us not forget that the fact that the Prime Minister is here at all before us today to explain her plan B, which looks suspiciously like plan A, and the fact that we had a meaningful vote at all are only because she was compelled to do so by Back-Bench action, not because of her own good will. I feel that good will, as well as time, is now slipping away. May I suggest to her that to prevent the old “strong and stable” becoming “scared of scrutiny”, and to win back good will from Members on both sides of the House, including many of her own Ministers, she should just rule out no deal now? Where there is a will, there is a way.

The Prime Minister

If the hon. Lady cared to look at the record in Hansard, she would see that far from being compelled to come to this House to give statements on the matter of Brexit, I have regularly come to this House to give statements on Brexit. I think the calculation was that, certainly between October and Christmas, the time was 24 hours. I have given more hours since to this House during debates and statements. I have not been reluctant to come to this House to answer questions from Members on the issue of Brexit.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con)

Last Friday, 50 of my Redditch constituents joined me here in Parliament on the bus tour and we held our own series of indicative votes. Out of all the options, the one that was overwhelmingly preferred was to leave the EU with the Prime Minister’s deal. When I asked whether anyone had changed their mind from leave to remain or remain to leave, not a single hand went up. Does the Prime Minister not think it is amazing that there are Opposition Members who think that they know more about what is in my constituents’ minds than my constituents themselves?

The Prime Minister

My hon. Friend is a very assiduous constituency Member of Parliament. I note that she takes every effort to make sure that she knows the minds of her constituents, and she is very clear from that that we should be leaving and that we should be leaving with a deal.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD)

Why does the Prime Minister continue to claim that the only way to rule out no deal is either to vote for her deal or to revoke article 50? She knows that that is not the case. A third way is to put her deal to the people in a people’s vote and let them choose between her deal and staying in the European Union. Why will she not admit that?

The Prime Minister

From discussions around the House, it is very clear that when people talk about a second referendum, there are those who talk about putting forward a question on the deal negotiated with the European Union—we still have work to do, as I said earlier, with people who put “remain” on the ballot paper—and there are those who say that the question should be about deal or no deal; that would not rule out no deal. Then there are those who say that a combination of all three of those options should be put to the British people. We put a very clear option to the British people in 2016; they voted, and we should deliver on it.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con)

The Prime Minister and others have talked about manifesto commitments this afternoon. Our Conservative manifesto said:

“As we leave the European Union, we will no longer be members of the...customs union”.

Will my right hon. Friend confirm that that is still her intention?

The Prime Minister

I absolutely stand by the manifesto commitments that we gave. I believe that it is important that we continue to have a good trading relationship with the European Union. I think there are many ways in which we can do that with appropriate customs arrangements.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab)

From her remarks this afternoon, it seems clear that the Prime Minister wants this House to vote for a way forward that is acceptable to her personally, not just to a majority in Parliament. Let me give her a further opportunity to give a straight answer to a very simple question. If there is a majority in the House for a particular way forward next week, will she honour that vote, and instruct her Government to do so? Why has she been unable so far this afternoon to be straight with people, and to give a straight answer to that very simple question?

The Prime Minister

I believe that the Government and this Parliament have a very clear instruction: we should ensure that we leave the European Union. That is something that we have a duty to deliver. That is what I am working on, and on making sure that we can do that with a deal that has the support of the House.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con)

I wonder if the Prime Minister has seen the Federation of Small Businesses' survey of its members, published today. It shows that business confidence is falling, and that there are concerns that

“The danger of a serious economic shock posed by a chaotic no-deal Brexit is real and imminent.”

The Prime Minister has shown that she understands the need to provide certainty to business, so what assurances can she give us that there will be a deal in place by 31 March?

The Prime Minister

I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that I am working with Members across this House to find the deal that will secure the support of this House. As I have said, where changes are necessary—the backstop is one of the issues that has specifically been raised—I will go back to the European Union. I want to see us leaving with a deal that gives certainty to businesses. Of course, the withdrawal agreement gives businesses the certainty of the implementation period, which enables them to prepare for the future relationship that we will have with the European Union.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)

I welcome the Prime Minister's decision to waive fees for EU nationals, but once again, she is four months behind the Scottish Government. It is clear—I see it again today—that her pig-headed stubbornness and ridiculous red lines have brought us to this position; it is a mess of her making. Why was she not willing to have cross-party talks two and a half years ago?

The Prime Minister

I have said previously that we have been listening to the comments made and the views given. We have listened to the views of the Scottish Government and we are listening to the views of the Welsh Government. The House has rejected the deal that we put before it; we will now work to find a deal that can secure the support of the House.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con)

Does my right hon. Friend agree that everyone in this House who values our precious Union should remember that the Scottish nationalists will seek to take full advantage of any failure of this House to deliver an orderly Brexit to break up our United Kingdom, and that we should all redouble our efforts to find a way forward that protects and strengthens the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister

I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. What we again see, and have seen in this House in recent weeks, is Scottish nationalists having only one interest: trying to break up our United Kingdom. Our United Kingdom is indeed precious, and membership of our United Kingdom is in the economic interests of the constituents of all the SNP Members of this House.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op)

The Prime Minister is still refusing to countenance any form of new customs union. Putting aside her interpretation of the referendum result on that point, because that is contested, could she give us any examples of specific products that she feels British consumers are currently paying too much for as a result of the common commercial policy—bearing in mind that things like clothing from Bangladesh are incredibly cheap in British shops—because the benefits of leaving a customs union are unclear, but the costs are evidently extremely high?

The Prime Minister

The benefit of not being part of the common commercial policy within the customs union of the European Union is that it will enable us to negotiate trade deals on our own behalf around the rest of the world. We are working to ensure that the arrangements—agreements—that are already in place between the European Union and countries around the world will be transitioned to the United Kingdom when we leave the European Union, and then we will work to enhance those trade deals with many around the world.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con)

May I thank the Prime Minister for the change to the fees, which I think could be very welcome across the House? Does she agree that when we had the cross-party meeting of manufacturing MPs, it was clear that there were a significant number of Labour Members who wanted to see a deal? Does she agree that it is really for the Leader of the Opposition to actually try to represent his colleagues, and he should go to these meetings? It is time to talk across the aisle.

The Prime Minister

I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for pointing that out. It is indeed the case that there were many Labour Members at that meeting who wanted to see us leaving with a deal. I have invited the Leader of the Opposition to come to talk to me about how we can find a deal that actually secures support across this House, and I think that in representing his Members he should be willing to talk.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)

Despite last week's historic defeat, the Prime Minister still seems hell-bent on indulging in an ill-conceived and potentially catastrophic game of Russian roulette with the lives of millions of people. Given the impasse that we are in, and with time running out, why is she so fearful of having

meaningful talks, without preconditions, with others in this place—talks that can include ruling out no deal, extending article 50, and the possibility of a second referendum?

The Prime Minister

We are not being fearful of having talks. We have invited people to talk, without preconditions. If the hon. Gentleman is talking about ruling out no deal, there are only two ways to rule out no deal—either we stay in the European Union or we have a deal. I want to see those talks so that we can ensure that we have a deal.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab)

In her statement, the Prime Minister said that she would “look for further ways to engage...regional representatives in England.” I declare an interest as one of them. What I have not heard her say today, or on other occasions, is how she thinks we can reset the relationship between Westminster and the rest of the country. How does she think that we can do this, and what is she going to do to ensure that people right around our country feel that they can take control of their lives and their own futures?

The Prime Minister

We have already been exploring in various ways how we can involve the elected city and regional Mayors in discussions that take place about a number of matters relating to the United Kingdom. When it comes to the shared prosperity fund, the hon. Gentleman will be able to input into that consultation any views that he might have about how we can ensure that the views of all parts of the United Kingdom are reflected in that.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op)

Having been the trade rapporteur for the Council of Europe to the WTO, can I gently say to the Prime Minister that in the event of a no-deal Brexit we would end up with our rules being made by a Council of Ministers where we would have less say, administered by a Commission where we would have fewer appointees, and enforced by a panel of judges that would not be democratically elected and would overrule British courts? Is this not a betrayal of the people who voted leave, because no deal would not only invoke a hard border in Northern Ireland but mean losing control? Leavers in Swansea are saying to me that they want a vote on a deal to find out whether the promises being made are delivering on their reasonable expectations—because, frankly, they are not.

The Prime Minister

The expectations of ensuring that we have a smooth and orderly Brexit and deliver the opportunities of Brexit are best delivered by having a deal. The work we are doing currently is to see what deal will secure the support of the House, but it will be for Members of the House once again to think about what they say to their constituents if they fail to support a deal that enables us to leave in that smooth and orderly way.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP)

Given that the Prime Minister is engaged in protracted discussions with the EU and Members of this House on the backstop, which seem to have been going on for as long as I can remember and are likely to go on for some time, it seems likely that an extension of article 50 will be required. Will she raise that with the EU? By which date does she believe that Parliament would have to agree on a deal for that extension not to be required?

The Prime Minister

The hon. Lady's question makes certain assumptions about what will happen. I am working to ensure that we get a deal across the House. I hope that all parties will be prepared to enter those talks and to work with us to ensure we have a deal that secures the support of the House.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op)

I welcome the decision to waive the fee for the EU settlement scheme, even if it should never have been implemented in the first place. I have spoken to several EU citizens who are completely unaware of the scheme, and problems with it are already being reported. Does the Prime Minister agree with EU citizens' groups who say that the Government's communication about the scheme is inadequate and that vulnerable people who are unable to prove their right to be in this country could face problems?

The Prime Minister

We have been working very closely with groups such as the 3million to ensure that we get the message out about the scheme for EU citizens who currently live here and about their rights. Of course, those rights were enshrined in the withdrawal agreement that was rejected by the House last week. We will continue to work to communicate to people what the scheme is and the requirements, in terms of people being able to show their status and get settled status, and to make sure that people know the decision that has been taken in relation to the fee.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP)

Both Dundee University and Abertay University in my city have been horrified to learn today that a no-deal scenario is still on the table. Indeed, university leaders have united to tell the Prime Minister that a no-deal Brexit could lead to

“an academic, cultural and scientific setback from which it would take decades to recover”.

Which part of that does the Prime Minister not understand?

The Prime Minister

If the hon. Gentleman is concerned about the universities in his constituency and the potential impact of no deal, he needs to ensure that we leave the European Union with a deal. We are working to ensure we get a deal that can be supported across the House. I assume from what he says that when a deal comes back to the House, he will support it.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab)

The Prime Minister has said that she is listening, but I have seen no evidence that she is hearing what people are saying. I want to push her on this point. She said that she is not prepared to table any indicative votes. What will she do with the amendments tabled to her motion in relation to no deal and extending article 50? What are her views on a citizens' assembly?

The Prime Minister

Of course, which of the amendments tabled to the motion were subject to a debate and a potential vote of the House would be a matter for Mr Speaker; which amendments are chosen is his decision.

On the hon. Lady's second question, as we negotiate the detail of our future relationship with the European Union across many areas that affect not just businesses but citizens, civil society, trade unions and those involved in security matters, we will see how we can work with people to enable their voice to be heard.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP)

I welcome the Prime Minister's renewed commitment to the Good Friday agreement. I look forward to seeing the results of the inquiry into which Cabinet member—because it can only be a Cabinet member—briefed the press exactly the opposite earlier today. Given that 70%-plus of the people of Northern Ireland voted for the Good Friday agreement, does the Prime Minister intend to have discussions with the political parties in Northern Ireland that represent that 70% majority, or does she intend to decide what is best for Northern Ireland based purely on the views of the only party in that country that wanted the Good Friday agreement to fail?

The Prime Minister

We speak regularly—both I and, indeed, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland regularly speak—with all the political parties in Northern Ireland.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab)

If the Prime Minister is so concerned about employment rights and if she is so concerned about environmental protection, why did it take two years and a defeat by 230 for them to be put on the agenda? If it is such a desperate afterthought, which it clearly is, why should we take seriously her protestations about being interested in them now?

The Prime Minister

The basis of the hon. Gentleman's question is not correct. He asks about—he references—the commitment that we have in relation to workers' rights. Look at what we have been doing to enhance workers' rights: the Matthew Taylor report, because we recognise the importance of ensuring that the rights of workers in the new gig economy are properly protected. Look at what we have done on the environment in relation to plastics: the 25-year environment plan that we have published. We have been working on these issues. We recognise that Members of this House have raised concerns to ensure that greater assurance is given on those issues, and that is exactly what we are going to do.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP)

Today marks the centenary of the first sitting of Dáil Éireann, established after an all-Ireland vote in the 1918 election. In 1998, the people of Ireland once again expressed themselves in an all-Ireland vote, and the Good Friday agreement was approved. I welcome the Prime Minister's renewed commitment to the Good Friday agreement, but a no-deal Brexit threatens this, so will the Prime Minister now assure the House that she respects the sovereignty of the Irish people, and will she take no deal off the table?

The Prime Minister

The hon. Lady will perhaps want to reflect on the nature of the question that she has just asked me and on the way in which she has put that question. May I just say to her that this is not a renewed commitment to the Belfast agreement? We have consistently committed to the Belfast agreement, and we remain committed.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP)

The Prime Minister will recall that the very first answer she gave at Prime Minister's questions this year was in response to my question about the EU settlement scheme. I warmly welcome the decision to scrap the pay-to-stay element of that scheme, but may I now ask her to go a step further? Will she end the stress for our EU friends, neighbours and colleagues, save the UK taxpayer money, and scrap the scheme altogether—simply guarantee their rights?

The Prime Minister

We are guaranteeing their rights, but we want to ensure that those EU citizens are able, in future, to show that they have that settled status here in the United Kingdom. That is why the scheme is so important.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP)
rose—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP)
rose—

Mr Speaker

Oh, what a delicious choice—two McDonalds. Of course, E comes before U, but on the other hand, C comes before M. I call Stuart C. McDonald.

Hon. Members
Hurrah!

Stuart C. McDonald
A very popular choice, Mr Speaker. Thank you very much.

Scrapping the settled status fee is indeed a welcome step, but if the Prime Minister is not going to follow the advice of my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), will she at least answer the question of why there are no appeal rights in the new immigration Bill for EU citizens who are refused settled status. Will she also answer: why do the Government continue to insist on an application cut-off date, inevitably meaning that the hundreds of thousands who miss that deadline will end up in a situation very close to that faced by the Windrush generation?

The Prime Minister

We have set a significant period of time for people to be able to apply under this scheme. I think that that is the right thing to do. May I just say that the hon. Gentleman may want to talk to his hon. Friends? I have just had a question from one of his hon. Friends that basically encouraged me to scrap the settlement scheme as a whole. Now the hon. Gentleman is saying to me that the settlement scheme should be extended for even longer.

Mr Speaker
I call Stewart Malcolm McDonald.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald
And don't you forget it, Mr Speaker!

The Prime Minister is of course to be commended for waiving the fee, as many have asked her to do, but I want to question her on the phrase she used about an “enhanced” status for the devolved Governments. Will it include her—and I mean the Prime Minister—appearing before Committees of the Scottish Parliament? When we talk about the enhanced status for the Government as opposed to the Parliament, will she tell us what concessions the Scottish Government can look forward to, to prove that that is not just meaningless twaddle?

The Prime Minister

As I say, I will be meeting the First Minister of Scotland and the First Minister of Wales—I hope to meet both of them this week—when I will be able to talk to them further about the arrangements that we will have in the future for that enhanced role for the Scottish Government.

On a different topic, may I say to the hon. Gentleman that I understand there was some difficulty—that he was the subject of some difficulties—from a particular part of the political spectrum in this country in his constituency on Friday, and I am sorry to hear that that took place? I understand that the police were able to deal with the issue, but no Member of this House should be subjected to that.

Mr Speaker

I echo entirely what the Prime Minister has just said on that matter. I think it will be something that commands universal assent across the House, and I thank her for what she has said.

Indeed, for that matter, I thank all 107 Back Benchers who questioned the Prime Minister, and the Prime Minister for patiently responding.