

Damian Green

Amendment (f) stands in my name and the names of an eclectic and wide-ranging group of right hon. and hon. Friends from three separate parties. Many of us have perhaps not found ourselves signing amendments together much in the past. The purpose of the amendment is manifold, but one of its purposes is to avoid what may face us at the end of this month—a cliff-edge, no-deal Brexit for which it is clear that the country as a whole and, in particular, many of our major industries are not prepared, as the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) has just repeated.

I am conscious that some who will support this amendment are sanguine about an immediate no-deal Brexit, so I should set out my own position. I think that no deal on 29 March would be a disaster for the economy of the country, a particular threat to manufacturing industry, and, in practical terms, a particular threat to the day-to-day lives of my constituents and everyone else in east Kent. That is why I oppose it.

Andrew Percy

I have the utmost respect for my right hon. Friend, but I will be opposing his amendment. Is it not somewhat strange that the very people who voted last night to kill Brexit for 29 March this year are now signed up to voting, and will vote this evening, to delay Brexit? This will only be the first delay, of course, because there will potentially be others in future. We are in a very strange place at the moment.

Damian Green

The one point in that intervention I agreed with is that we are in a very strange place at the moment. I think the whole House can agree with that.

Sir Bernard Jenkin

Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Damian Green

I will allow one more intervention—the hon. Lady.

Lady Hermon

I am most grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene. I would like him to explain in some detail whether or not the proposals that he is asking the House to vote on tonight protect the Good Friday/Belfast agreement in all its parts, and particularly the consent principle, which is guaranteed in the withdrawal agreement—the Prime Minister's Brexit deal—on page 307.

Damian Green

That is an extremely valid point. I believe that they do. I will come on to what is actually in the amendment shortly, if I may.

As I hope I have made clear, I am as keen as anyone to reject an immediate no deal. I will support the Government's motion this evening. Indeed, this amendment is deliberately designed not to replace the Government's motion, as many amendments do, but to act in addition to it. But this House should not deceive itself. Voting against no deal does not mean that a deal will magically emerge. This House has to agree a deal, and that deal needs to be acceptable to the EU. We can pass motions ruling out no deal until we are blue in the face, but it will make no difference unless there are options that this House will support. That is a piece of realism that the House has not yet fully addressed. I voted for the deal last night, and indeed in January, and I am happy to assure the Government that I will do so again if they wish to try one more time.

More broadly, I campaigned for remain, but I respect the result of the referendum. I therefore draw the conclusion that I should vote for a deal that delivers Brexit. My principal aim in all this, and the aim of those of us who support this amendment, is to make sure that Brexit is as smooth as possible for the citizens and businesses of this country. This seems to me to be an honourable aim whatever view you took during the referendum. It is a view you can hold if you believe that Brexit is the best opportunity Britain has had for generations, or if you believe that it is a mistake whose damage has to be mitigated. From both those viewpoints, you can arrive at the same practical conclusion.

That practical conclusion is what lies behind amendment (f). It has four separate parts. I was grateful that the Prime Minister accepted at least two of them in full earlier today at Prime Minister's questions.

The first one that the Prime Minister accepted, and which the Government have already implemented, is the publication of the tariff schedules that we will need. I make no comment on the individual merits of each schedule—those are clearly a matter for legitimate debate—but the need for information as early as possible is paramount, and I am glad that the Government have taken that step, which is urged in the amendment. The second one is unilaterally guaranteeing the rights of EU citizens resident here. That has been a desire of Members on both sides of the House since the referendum, and I am glad that the Government are on board with that.

The third key element of the amendment is that the Government should seek an extension of article 50 until 22 May—the latest date possible to avoid European elections, the prospect of which brings out the Brenda from Bristol in all of us. That would be a useful delay, and it would give business more time to prepare for the new tariff regime.

The fourth and largest part of the proposal is to offer money and standstill agreements in a range of areas to the EU, in return for a period between now and December 2021 in which we could negotiate the future relationship. In other words, it provides a gentle glide path to that new relationship, instead of the cliff edge that might otherwise threaten us. The future relationship is, of course, much more important than the withdrawal agreement, which this House keeps turning down. It will decide our future prosperity and security. This amendment focuses on that long-term goal, given the obvious difficulties of the short-term goal of a withdrawal agreement.

I know the objections; I have heard them. The first is that Monsieur Barnier has already said that he will not have it. It seems to me that if we do not proceed on a path just because Michel Barnier has said he will not have it, we will never get anywhere in these negotiations. The second is that this is a managed no deal. As I say, I would much prefer a deal, but if we cannot sign one, it is better to have a plan B that avoids chaos and gives us years to craft a proper trade deal as part of a future relationship. I urge colleagues on all sides, whatever their views on wider European issues, to look favourably on this amendment. We live in a free vote world these days, so if necessary, they should ignore their Whips—they can be nice to them tomorrow. We need ways out of this impasse. This is one.