

Yvette Cooper's speech at the Centre for European Reform, 11 March 2019

Tomorrow we are supposed to vote on the Prime Minister's Deal.

It's the same deal we voted on in January. It was defeated by 230 votes.

It's the same deal that the Prime Minister herself voted against in February when she supported Graham Brady's amendment calling for alternative arrangements instead.

Tomorrow we are supposed to vote on it again.

Nothing has changed. Nothing has changed.

What has the Prime Minister been doing for 8 weeks?

Even if by magic, the Attorney General comes up with something to add at the last minute we will have barely hours to consider it before we are supposed to vote. This is the worst kind of chaos and brinkmanship.

There has been no plan B. No flexibility. No reaching out. No change to the red lines.

The clock is truly run down. The can kicked and squashed. The road has run out.

We have no idea what kind of Brexit we are going to get. In just over 2 weeks' time.

Businesses don't know if they will face tariffs. Public services don't know if they will face shortages. Families don't know if food prices will go up. How can anyone plan?

Our allies across the world are flabbergasted at the mess we seem to be in.

The country feels more divided than ever.

The only thing uniting people is the belief that the Government and politicians are screwing things up.

Everyone is still shouting at each other.

Half the country – particularly the younger half – will feel betrayed if we leave like this.

The other half – including many of those whose voices too often don't get heard – will feel betrayed if we just stop and give up.

Betrayal is a dangerous emotion in politics – it can poison democracies.

Carry on like this and we will not hold our country together.

Carry on like this and whatever the Brexit outcome, nothing will endure.

The Prime Minister had a responsibility to steer us through this. To find a course for the country that is sustainable, has legitimacy and is in the national interest.

Instead there are 18 days to go and we have no deal and no plan in place.

Maybe the Prime Minister still has a cunning plan. But the stakes are now far too high to assume she has this under control. Time is running out. We can't afford to stand back and wait.

So I want to propose some next steps this morning.

Theresa May needs to accept that her approach isn't working whether her deal gets through or not this week. As Prime Minister, she needs to show some leadership and reset the debate. This is the point to pivot not to dig in.

There are practical steps the Prime Minister can take now. Not easy ones but sensible ones, step by step, to build more consensus around a way through.

If she won't find a way forward, then Parliament has a responsibility to do so instead.

And once again we will be ready to work cross party on amendments to do that.

Two weeks ago we made a start.

Fearful that the Prime Minister was drifting towards the cliff edge, leaving the EU with no deal in place, we put forward a cross party plan to create a Parliamentary safeguard.

In the event, the Prime Minister adopted it. 500 MPs voted for it. Only 20 voted against.

As a result of that work, if the Prime Minister's Deal does not go through this week, Parliament will be able to vote on whether to leave with No Deal or extend Article 50.

The head of the CBI, Carolyn Fairburn, described it as "a brief moment of sanity."

But if we are not careful it will prove only a brief one.

There are rumours that the Prime Minister will pull the vote tomorrow, and then pull the votes on Wednesday and Thursday too.

Whatever she does tomorrow, I don't believe she will pull the votes on no deal and extending Article 50. She gave me and Parliament her word.

There is another rumour that she might abstain on the vote - simply leaving the country for talks in Brussels, to avoid the vote.

I can't believe that can be true either. She's the Prime Minister, she can't be frit.

This vote will be about whether to knowingly jeopardise medicine supplies, knowingly stop our police getting information on wanted criminals, or knowingly smash a hammer into the heart of our manufacturing industry.

For a Prime Minister to vote to put all those things at risk would be unthinkable. To run away from that vote would be worse. It would be a complete derogation of duty.

So yes, the Prime Minister needs to show some leadership, insisting that her Government vote against no deal and for some extra time.

But then she needs to answer the question – time for what.

The risk is that the Prime Minister just does more of the same, running round the same circles on the backstop, and running down the new clock.

But then we will just be back in the same place in a few months' time.

The Prime Minister needs to understand why her approach isn't working in order to understand what she needs to do next.

There are two underlying problems – and neither of them are called the backstop.

The first is that she has done nothing to build consensus.

The second is that she has done everything to avoid clarity on the future.

Or put a different way

We are more divided than ever.

And the deal isn't a proper deal at all – none of the big decisions have been taken, only ducked and deferred.

Parliament is fragmented because the country is fragmented.

Three years on from the referendum, nothing has been done to heal the divides.

That's bad for cohesion and democracy.

It is also very unstable.

Brexit involves major constitutional change. Constitutional frameworks need to be underpinned by a broad consensus – either a clear majority of support, or at least for enough opponents to be reconciled. And they need to emerge from a legitimate process that commands respect. Or they won't last.

Welsh devolution, despite only being passed by 50.3% to 49.7%, has been sustained because its original opponents have been involved and reconciled. The Scottish referendum is settled – for now – not just because of the result, but because of the Smith Commission that followed it and brought people together.

Since the 2016 Brexit referendum, far from trying to bring the country together, the Prime Minister has done the opposite.

It didn't have to be like this.

Almost 500 MPs voted to trigger Article 50 – more than half of them like me had voted and campaigned for remain but felt we should support the Prime Minister in the vote in order to respect the referendum result.

People were ready to make this process work.

I argued immediately after the referendum – and again after the General Election - for a Cross Party Commission to oversee the negotiations and bring different views together.

So did William Hague.

I even proposed it to the Cabinet Minister initially in charge of Brexit preparations – one Oliver Letwin.

I said at that time “if the deal is going to be sustainable it needs cross-party support and a broad consensus behind it”.

But the Prime Minister refused.

She refused proper consultation with business, unions and the public on what kind of Brexit we should have.

She did everything possible to avoid or frustrate Parliamentary votes.

We've had more consultation on inland waterways or door closures on the DLR than on the Brexit options.

Instead of reaching out, the Prime Minister has bunkered in.

Instead of talking with people across the country the Prime Minister has been talking only to her party.

And only to one section of her party too.

She has allowed hardliners in the ERG group to hijack the Government and hijack the country.

I feel personally angry at the Prime Minister for doing this to the country. Whilst I have often strongly disagreed with her, I have always respected her. And I always thought she was a grown up who would be sensible and responsible.

Instead her handling of the Brexit process has proved reckless and irresponsible. She cannot be allowed to carry on like this.

But part of the reason there is no consensus is also because no one knows what Brexit will really look like.

The Prime Minister's Deal isn't really a deal at all, it's a stop gap with a back stop. A holding position with an insurance policy attached.

The Deal she put forward is a blind Brexit. It doesn't tell us anything about the future relationship. Will it be close to Canada, nearly Norway or a resuscitated Chequers? None of us have a clue.

The Political Declaration is a fudge.

Paragraph 23 talks about "building on the single customs territory." That's a customs union.

Paragraph 17 talks about "an independent trade policy" That's the opposite.

It's like we are leaving and slamming the door behind us without any idea where we will rest our heads tonight.

Following the Conservative Party on a journey into the unknown while they all fight with each other over the map.

And it matters.

It matters because even if her deal goes through it means leaving on a false prospectus which could lead to an even bigger political mess when it unravels later on.

It also matters because that lack of clarity is why we are so paralysed now.

The reason the Prime Minister lost by a phenomenal 230 votes in January wasn't the backstop, it was the fact that the future wasn't pinned down, and people on all sides fear that weakens us in the negotiations to come.

So those who hate the backstop fear it will last for ever. Those who like the backstop fear it will be ripped up.

Those who want a close relationship fear they will get a distant one, those who want distance fear ending up too close.

I'm worried we won't get a customs union for Yorkshire manufacturing. Hard Brexiteers worry we won't be able to do a new deregulatory trade deal with the US.

None of us want to write a blank cheque now and trust the Prime Minister and Michel Barnier will sort it out later on.

The Prime Minister hoped the fudge would help everyone sign up to it. Instead it has done the opposite.

The initial insistence by the EU on finalising the withdrawal agreement and the transition before discussing the principles of the future relationship has been illogical and counter productive and has helped to create these problems now.

They also need to realise that more flexibility and more clarity is required. Their stated willingness to make the political declaration "more binding, more precise," suggests a better way forward now.

The Prime Minister needs to reset the debate and set out a plan.

We have to use an extension to make decisions about what kind of Brexit we should have and to work out how we build consensus on the way forward.

The Government should start with some practical steps that most people should be able to sign up to whether they voted Leave or Remain, whether they want a hard Brexit or a soft Brexit or not to leave at all.

Process itself isn't the answer.

But without a process that has some kind of legitimacy, purpose and organisation we will never get to an answer.

So instead of always banging on about the backstop the Prime Minister should focus on the future partnership.

Instead of getting stuck on the insurance policy, she should focus on getting agreement on what kind of Brexit people want to see. A proper plan not a fudged Political Declaration.

She should put the Withdrawal Agreement to one side until we've agreed the principles of where we want to end up. Then come back to the Withdrawal Agreement with its transitional period and its backstop insurance policy and reassess it in that light.

This isn't about which side of the referendum you were on, it's about knowing what we are getting and making decisions. The Vote Leave campaign during the referendum said "Taking back control is a careful change, not a sudden stop - we will negotiate the terms of a new deal before we start any legal process to leave"

We were going to have to start facing these choices this summer anyway under the Prime Minister's Deal. We were going to have to make these decisions during the 2 year transition period, while nothing actually changed in practice.

So instead let's take the first few months of the transition period to make those decisions as part of the Article 50 process instead. Let's decide before we finish Article 50 rather than after.

In her letter to Jeremy Corbyn the Prime Minister promised "to give Parliament a bigger say in the mandate for the next phase of the negotiations to address concerns that MPs cannot be sure precisely what future relationship it would lead to."

So why not do that now? Get on with it.

The Prime Minister should use an Article 50 extension to be bold and offer a series of indicative votes to test Parliament's views – as Hilary Benn and Frank Field have both suggested from different sides of the original referendum debate.

Then she should publish the Government's draft mandate for the negotiations on the future relationship and let Parliament put amendments to it.

If she can't cope with that, she could set up a lighter, quicker version of the Smith Commission after the Scottish referendum, bringing together representatives of all parties, leave and remain supporters with an independent chair to propose a compromise.

Once Parliament has agreed the negotiating mandate, then the Government needs to seek agreement on the key principles with the EU too.

That doesn't mean getting the full free trade agreement. Everyone accepts that will take years.

But if Parliament votes for a customs union or the EEA or a Chequers style customs partnership, the Government needs to get proper agreement with the EU that it can be done.

If Parliament chooses a straightforward option the process could be relatively swift. But we will be stronger if we take these decisions and negotiate them with the EU before rather than after we finish the Article 50 process.

In addition, the Government needs to use the extension to consult, involve and compromise – at least sowing the seeds that can help us reach consensus later on. Businesses, public services and local government should all be involved.

The debate can't just be in Westminster. The Prime Minister should be bold and find new ways to involve the public in these debates in a thoughtful and purposeful way – following the experience of Ireland on abortion or suggestions from Gordon Brown and John Major to hold citizens assemblies drawing together people with different views to talk properly about sovereignty, trade or immigration.

Not as an alternative to Parliamentary democracy. But as a way to broaden the public debate and feed views in to the Government or Parliamentary process.

Given how controversial this process has been, given the constitutional implications of the final deal, in the end unless a clear consensus behind it has emerged, then there may need to be some kind of public consent for it to endure – be that through a General Election or a referendum. Otherwise it just won't last.

But the challenge is to find a way to build consent and legitimacy not to just create more anger and division. So that confirmation process is best resolved once we have a clearer view what Brexit looks like.

I believe most people in Britain want the chance to come together again. I don't believe most people want us all always to be shouting, whatever social media might feel like.

On Saturday in Yorkshire I talked to a Leave voter who now wants to stop Brexit because he fears it is making the country too divided, and a Remain voter who doesn't want a referendum because he fears it will make division worse. Both of them told me they wanted the country to come together.

So wherever we end up, and however long it takes, we have to stop the language of betrayal or treachery and establish some respect for each other's views no matter how much we disagree. All sides of this debate have a sense of patriotism and purpose.

And that matters more than ever this week.

I want to conclude with a final reflection.

I have deliberately not argued for a particular end point today. I am deliberately trying to find a process that has some legitimacy that people can sign up to whatever their view on Brexit and whatever final outcome they want to see.

I have done so because I see no other way through and I think we will only solve this step by step. I realise there are plenty of reasons why this might not work, but I can see far more reasons why every other option won't work and something still has to happen.

And given the mess we are in I don't believe we can all stand back and hope someone else tries to sort it out, or just stay on the sidelines shouting.

Politics feels harder than ever right now. But there is so much at stake.

The times when politics isn't easy are also the times when politics matters most.

Politics is often described as the art of the possible. But when it feels like the art of the impossible, that's when it really counts."

ENDS