

3.37 pm January 28<sup>th</sup>. Lords Debate on Brexit progress.

## Lord Howell of Guildford (Con)

### **A Ship of Fools**

My Lords, as the Brexit process nears its high noon, I suggest to your Lordships that it might be a useful time for us as a House, as the noble Baroness has suggested, to think a little not just about the withdrawal process but about safeguarding the health of our parliamentary democracy. With all this wild talk about citizens' assemblies, the national fury and frustration at the deadlock in Parliament, and Parliament being widely despised and, indeed, ridiculed, I am afraid that the parliamentary institution itself is clearly now in danger.

Parliament is being depicted outside this place as a ship of fools, drifting fast towards a no-deal cataract, with all the Members of Parliament on board desperately calling for the Government to somehow shift, abolish, postpone or rule out the cataract and the chaos ahead—with a shower of amendments, as we have heard, and with a proposed Bill which, incidentally, I understand cannot be passed anyway, regardless of filibustering, without a money Bill from the Government; so it cannot be passed at all, if the Government oppose it. It might be worth the noble Lord, Lord Newby, checking on that, because he is looking puzzled. The suggestion that you can somehow wish the cataract away is a brilliant idea—if you shut your eyes tight and wish hard, the nasty waterfall or cliff-edge will disappear and something else will turn up. Of course, in real life the only course is to turn the ship round and head fast upstream to the safety of the withdrawal deal that we have on the table, with the backstop tweaked, clarified or perforated if possible—but, basically, that is the one anchorage available. Short of that, the rocks of the cataract are unavoidable, however many amendments MPs pass and however many tables it is taken off.

A number of people, especially our good friends the Lib Dems, keep saying, “Well, what about a second referendum?” The problem—and I really ask them to think about this, because I do not think they have—is that plebiscites do not solve anything. First, they certainly weaken parliamentary government and smash our national unity, as we saw with the previous referendum. The idea that a second referendum—in fact, it will be the third—will settle the issue is pure fantasy. Secondly, mass voting events are now more open to vicious manipulation than

ever before. Of course, dictators twisted and corrupted mass opinion in the 20th century, but now that giant algorithms and incredible power can target millions of people individually and bombard them with a cascade of endless slogans, true or untrue, fake or real, the facts are 10 times worse. Indeed, not an hour ago, we heard a Question emphasising that point.

Now there is an even bigger danger of distortion which applies not only to plebiscites but to all big public votes and elections, and that is foreign meddling. Disinformation has become a worldwide currency, and a cheap one too, allowing not just weaker nations but sinister hacking groups of no known allegiance to undermine and confuse facts and truth so that discord, descending into street violence, can be sown and all forms of democracy discredited with terrifying ease. In effect, the true voice of the people has become harder and harder to discern and act on. That is the reality we now face.

As for the next stage of Brexit, anyone who thinks that it will all be put to bed via a referendum or any other means in the next two years is living in a fool's paradise. Like many others, I have struggled with this underlying conflict in one form or another for most of my political life. In or out of the European Union, and with all the tensions between existing members, which are growing all the time, I see a future Europe of constant bargaining: an endless, continuous set of disputes between the legitimate yearnings for national unity, identity, sovereignty and independence and the pull of ever-deeper interdependence and collaboration, as the noble Lord, Lord Wallace of Saltaire, reminded us the other day. These forces are working in both directions, they are driven by unstoppable technology and they are constantly clashing as new issues come along. My noble friend Lord Patten—I do not know whether he is in his place today—was worrying about having to debate customs unions for ever. Yes, he is right. They will indeed be debated in 50 different varieties long after he and I have gone.

As for Ireland, the puzzle for me is this: it has been obvious from the start that, contrary to what has been asserted, modern means are available and can work to keep the border invisible. At first, the EU high priests said that all these systems were “magical” and dismissed them, but now we have Mr Juncker admitting that they exist and could work. The reality is that long before we get anywhere near a backstop, well inside any transition phase, a workable open border can be up and running—probably rather similar to either the sort of minimalist borders that exist already in Northern Ireland or the sort of borders that exist elsewhere across Europe between EU member states, all of which are completely consistent with the subtle ambiguity at the heart of the Good Friday agreement.

There is the additional reality that a hard, sealed border is in practice impossible. In Ireland, under Mr Willie Whitelaw almost half a century ago, I and my colleagues tried to close the border with military and customs posts to stop the Provisionals and their weapons coming up from Dundalk. It made not the slightest difference. All that happened was that a number of young soldiers and brave customs officials got murdered. You would need a wall across Ireland, like in Mexico or Israel, to make a hard border, which no one wants anyway.

We are on a long journey, step by step. As my noble friend the Duke of Wellington said in a speech in the Chamber the other day, many things that cannot be fixed now will become soluble later. As the wise noble Lord, Lord Bew, says, “Things evolve”. Relationships evolve. Trade patterns evolve. The EU evolves; it is doing so very rapidly before our eyes. People who keep calling for certainty and guarantees will have to go on calling, because there is no certainty in life or business and certainly not in our connections with our neighbours. Francis Bacon said, “If a person will begin with certainties, they shall end in doubts”.

I am not closely acquainted with the Prime Minister, and I have hardly ever met her, but I know political courage when I see it. She is criticised for Brexit delay, but actually the delay is proving invaluable. I would make it a confidence vote. A touch more delay, and a good strong will, will work wonders. Every day that passes is clearly bringing a stronger realisation, to those with closed minds, that short of massive dislocation and self-harm, there is only one practical way of delivering Brexit—hopefully with a few adjustments wrung out of the EU, but we will have to see what can be obtained. We know the realities. The Prime Minister’s courage, denounced by all the jejune know-all commentators and political foes as stubbornness, is what will pull us through to the next stage in the evolution of our ties both with our regional European neighbours and with the utterly transformed world of Asia, Africa, the Commonwealth network and Latin America—where most of the growth is going to be and with whom we need to associate more closely than ever before with these parties to ensure our future prosperity and security. It used to be a case of the east catching up with the west; now, it is becoming the other way around.

The longer we delay the Brexit journey with pretence alternatives, unicorn solutions and child-like yearnings for riskless certainty and a rose-tinted past, the slower will be our adjustment to the entirely new world conditions that have already come about, and that we now face. We should get on with it, and that, I believe, is now the wish of this nation.

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3.47 pm