

4.48 pm

Lord Howell of Guildford (Con)

My Lords, I am honoured to speak after the most reverend Primate, whose voice is much valued in the land in these troubled times. I am also grateful to the Whips for reinstating me in this debate after some of us were cut off a bit abruptly before Christmas. I assure your Lordships that I shall not repeat what I would have said then and that I have something a little new to say. It is always prudent to show gratitude to the Whips, especially when I am going to say some things that will not, I fear, be popular with them or my party.

To continue reviewing our current situation in partisan terms is completely useless. Everyone knows that my party, the Conservatives, are badly split, not down the middle but with a significant and entrenched dissenting minority. Everyone knows that the Labour Party is also badly split, although this is much easier to cover up in opposition. They do it rather well, if I may say so. But we all know, and endless polls confirm, that at least a third of the Labour Party in the other place do not much like Mr Corbyn's policies, while the excellent Opposition Front Bench here in this House is clearly cool towards him and leading figures such as the noble Lord, Lord Mandelson, have vowed to work to undermine him every day of their lives. Even our own Lib Dems, so strongly and assiduously represented here in their massive ranks, have another referendum as their official line, but they know, or at least the wiser ones must know, that a plebiscite is a dangerous and divisive instrument and is not true democracy, which always has to be filtered and mediated. Mass opinion is not only a mosaic of differing views but changes from week to week. The only solid, civilised and true democracy is the parliamentary sort that we are trying to operate here at Westminster. We all know that in our heart of hearts.

The incontrovertible reality now, which is as plain as a pikestaff, is that the Parliament we have, as presently constituted—that is, the House of Commons—cannot agree on anything positive. It can unite against no deal—we are all for that—but without an agreed alternative it will happen anyway, however much it is voted against and however many people are whipped through the Lobbies. Everyone keeps asserting their own position and none will prevail. There is talk of Parliament taking control, but Parliament is not a Government, and if the present House of Commons cannot decide on or support any way forward, it must be replaced by one that can.

How could that be done? My advice to the Prime Minister, which I am sure she will not take, would be to make the upcoming vote on the withdrawal agreement, or perhaps the next one if the first is lost, not only a three-line Whip but a vote of confidence in the Government. Of course, the best thing would be for her to win or to narrow greatly the majority against her—that I continue to hope for—but if she still loses on a clear confidence issue, as seems highly likely, she should immediately call a general election, as the five-year rule would fully permit her to do. It is true that she has undertaken not to lead the Conservative Party into the next election in 2022, but for a 2019 election she would still have to be in place. Based on Lords Library figures, under the 2011 Act, the timing from a no-confidence defeat to the polling day requires about seven weeks, giving us a new Parliament well before Article 50 day, March 29, and we can probably get a short technical extension to that anyway. Of course it would be a gamble, and it may be a gamble very few want, but it would also have the smack of firm national leadership.

The consensus of commentators and so-called polling experts and, I suspect, of many noble Lords, is that this just hands victory to the Corbyn cabal and destroys the one available deal and agreement that is on the table, but I wonder. The proclaimed consensus of opinion is often spectacularly wrong, and I hear experienced Labour voices warn that that could certainly be so. Why should yet another divided party, led by someone with policies most Labour supporters regard with dismay and no credible alternative Brexit path—because none exists—win the nation's trust? The European Union has made crystal clear that the deal agreed is locked and final. It may be that it can be tweaked here and there, on duration, legality and so on, but the promise that there is a deal around the corner, based on Labour's so-called six tests, that is much better than the one agreed is pure fantasy and delusion or worse.

My guess is that in a new Parliament the PM's losses on the rebel Brexiteer front would be small and outweighed by support elsewhere for her deal. The nation wants an orderly Brexit deal and does not want deadlock. That is the real consensus and the mood of the nation, which must somehow be fed back into a Parliament that reflects it. Far from an indecisive and paralysed outcome, an election could provide a new Parliament with a firm majority for the deal now on the table. New cross-party alliances could form—in fact they are already developing, as we can read. We would at last begin to emerge from the labyrinth which has no other exits, except a no-deal disaster, although plenty of wrangling

and negotiation, which some people have called a Europe of constant bargaining, lies ahead.

I believe there is an overwhelming national view to be harvested in support of the PM's transition plan and gradual further disentanglement from the old, outdated EU model. I repeat that we are and must remain a parliamentary democracy, otherwise we are nothing. The answer is, and must be found, in our ancient Parliament elected by the people. That is where we should keep it, whatever the cost. That is where the nation is entitled to look for it, if not in this present stalemated and deadlocked Parliament, then in a new one.