

Lord Howell proposed opening Speech to Lords 10.12.18

ML To say that the situation has changed somewhat since I first drafted a speech for this debate is a gross understatement.

I WAS going to tell your Lordships that I had had a useful weekend re-reading all previous speeches in this debate and I can assure your Lordships that they were a lot better than the rubbish in some of the Sunday papers.

Every speech has been utterly sincere and principled and of course deserves full respect, although - surprise surprise -nothing like a consensus emerges.

But all this has now been overtaken by events. So it just may be now that, with the other place in confusion, this House can offer some reflections which might be heard. Anyway, we can try.

ML, the phrase which really chills me was not uttered in this Chamber but very much in the media and the other place last week, and again today down there – namely that ‘Parliament is taking, or has taken, control of the situation’ , and intends by all accounts to carry on asserting that control.

ML, Parliament is not a Government. It can make or break governments and has done so in the past. It can call Governments to account- and I am all for that. But it cannot govern at the best of times , and certainly not when it is riven by a dozen different and deeply entrenched views.

ML Remember that in 1648/9 they tried a spell of parliament being in control – and that came to a very sticky end, both for Parliament and many of its leaders!

In its current state Parliament cannot possibly agree on any clear way forward. That is **the one thing** on which almost all are agreed – at least in private !

ML, Norway-plus, Canada-plus , EFTA, another referendum, six tests and somehow renegotiate, No deal, mini-deals, Crash out, Go back in, ‘Temporary arrangements’ (and we all know what ‘temporary’ means in politics) - all these and more have been advanced with deep conviction and the hope they will somehow turn out to be the winners.

The one certainty is that not ONE of these can at this moment command a Commons consensus.

ML, The outcome is plain and staring us all in the face, whatever our preferences – a vote **against** the some kind of Compromise proposal that *is* on the table, will with **absolute certainty be a vote for chaotic impasse** , with an outcome who knows what and when, but likely to be the very opposite of what those so voting intended.

Moreover this Compromise before us happens to be the only compromise on offer from the EU – and re-opening it risks losing even that. Small changes may be possible – the PM says she has spoken to other EU leaders who are ready to discuss them. But the idea that the 27 can suddenly come up with a further big concession or a new agreement as a sort of seasonal gift - well, you believe that only if you believe in Father Christmas.

The media keep on asking the PM what is Plan B if she just cannot get a compromise through. . But if Parliament is in control then it is Parliament which should have Plan B, but of course it has no plan at all , nor is it capable of producing one.

ML Then we come to the hated backstop which seems to cause so much agitation

The Loudest-voiced Brexiteers used to say that the N.I, border is no problem and that it can be kept invisible and wide open physically and

yet policed with modern technology, GPRS, CCTV, drones , warehouse checking, random patrols and so on.

It happens that I agree with them and also believe what the Agreement calls ‘alternative arrangements’ could all be in place before December 2020 or within a few months after. There is a hint of that possibility in the Agreement.

But now the hard-line Brexiteers have changed their tune – saying that it cannot be done during the transition and that we are bound to be entrapped, or in vassalage (ridiculous phrase) , forever by the backstop.

ML, The EU does not want a hard border, the Republic does not want it, Northern Ireland does not want it, (neither Nationalists nor Unionists), London does not want it. It is anyway quite impractical, short of building a wall across Ireland . We tried to make this a hard, old-style customs-post border when I served under Willie Whitelaw , to keep the Provos and their weapons out.

ML, it did not work then and does not work now .

All along there has in fact been only one practical and modern solution to the border issue. It can be reached and settled and agreed long before we get anywhere near the backstop. Insisting that it is sinister trap is defeatist nonsense and certainly a lawyer’s labyrinth, but one we have no need to enter.

ML ,Like most others I have wrestled with the dilemmas before us. And like others I have carefully considered the huge opportunities ahead for Britain as we link up with the great new networks and great new services and goods markets of Asia, Eurasia and Africa , where all the growth will be , and especially the Commonwealth network , which is now becoming so full of potential in modern conditions.

I’m mindful too that however many laws we pass or ‘take back control’ over, they will nearly all be heavily shaped by our

international needs and obligations as an open society in a totally interdependent world (as Lord Wallace of Saltaire reminded us).

And of course we should consider the rapid changes and upheaval going on across continental Europe, of which the digitally-driven chaos in France is the latest manifestation of the erosion of moderate politics in Europe and the rise of extremes .

In or out ,we still have a **duty** to help our increasingly dysfunctional European neighbourhood towards a better and safer future -especially insecurity areas.

I am left after all the drama with the wise words of figures like my noble friend Lord Hague, or in this actual debate NLs Lord Hope, Lord Bridges, Lord Butler, Lord Griffiths and numerous others .

Also, if you want the authentic Churchillian voice, I strongly advise Noble Lords to visit the speech by Sir Nicholas Soames (NOT Boris Johnston) in the Commons last Thursday

ML Their common message is that, like it or like it not, we have to take one step at a time and advance with some kind of Compromise deal, faults and all, to a better future.

ML ,Every other path, now more than ever, is the way to chaos.

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