

## **European Union (Withdrawal) Act – Debate in the House of Commons**

**5 December 2018**

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab)

At the outset, I really want to congratulate the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah) on a very powerful speech that was rooted in reality, and the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) on the successful passage of his amendment yesterday. He has been truly outstanding through all these Brexit debates.

For very good reason, I want to use this occasion to say a fond farewell to my German teacher, Keith Walker, from my old school of Wolstanton in Newcastle-under-Lyme. Keith passed away a fortnight ago and his funeral is on Friday. Mr Walker, as we called him back then, was instrumental in helping to form my views on Britain's right and proper place at the heart of Europe. His wonderful teaching made sure that I got a place to study German at Oxford, and it was because of Keith that I first took part in—and then for six years helped to organise—international youth exchanges in Berlin with the German War Graves Commission, when the wall was the starkest reminder of the outcome of the second world war and of the cold war that followed.

In the trading of facts and fictions during the disastrous 2016 referendum, the historical perspective very much got completely lost. Yes, the European Union could be frustrating. It was not perfect, like everything, but from its origins after the war as the European Coal and Steel Community through to the Common Market, it has been very much part of the architecture of peace, trade, dialogue and prosperity in our times. Could we ever imagine that the states of the former Yugoslavia would have engaged in such shameful blood-letting had they been part of the European Community, to which we have belonged for 45 years and membership of which was confirmed by 67% of our people at the first referendum in 1975?

Now fast-forward to the debacle of 2016. My constituency and home town of Newcastle-under-Lyme voted around 60:40 to leave, and it is hardly a secret that I profoundly disagree with that verdict. Aside from matters of economy and trade, history shows that when Britain has been disengaged from European affairs, it has harmed not only our national interests but the national interests of countries on the continent as well. We have had, and still have, very much to offer.

When the subject of Brexit came up on the doorstep last year, I politely—I hope—disagreed with people of a leave persuasion, and then we moved on to discussing the state of our local hospital and the potholes in the road. For all the heat that we feel at Westminster, most people were simply not obsessed about Europe. The great, reasonable majority want us to get this right in the national interest—and, for all the reasons that most Members have outlined today, the Prime Minister’s deal does not serve that national interest.

In Newcastle, we campaigned as passionately in the referendum as at any general election. At the start, it was possible to have a fairly reasonable debate. Quite a number of people I had known for many years, and would have sworn were leavers, said that their heart was with “out”, but their head said “stay in” for jobs, investment, kids and opportunities for the future. So it was possible to have a decent discussion—until about a fortnight before voting day, that is. Then, at the entrance to my town, like many others up and down the land, the big red banner posters went up saying, “Turkey, population 76 million, is joining the EU—vote leave”. Photographs of queues of refugees were mingled, to great effect, with an old-fashioned blue British passport. It was of course an outright lie, but it was impossible to get that through to people, because their immediate response, time and again, was “What are you going to do about the Turks?”

What I did not know at the time was that that message was not only being shouted out from old-fashioned billboards but was reverberating exaggeratedly around social media in targeted dark ads that remainers like me would never see. That has only

become clear since our Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee inquiry into fake news, involving Facebook in particular. Of course, that inquiry has followed up on breaches of the law and spending limits by both main leave campaigns.

But two years on, I do not want to cry over spilt milk. I think that the past two years have shown that people are now much better informed about the consequences of exactly how we leave—if indeed we do. If the Prime Minister loses next week's vote, we are in interesting territory, to say the least, but one thing must be certain: no matter how much she tries to cling on in the hope of making amends for her disastrous election performance last year, the Prime Minister really has to go, like her predecessor did after the referendum result. Then the question for us will be whether the House can form a majority to chart the way forward, or whether this can only be settled by a general election or a referendum.

I view the prospect of another people's vote with more than trepidation. I do not know how it is going to be possible to have a reasonable debate when the poll will be framed by shrieks of betrayal from most of our printed press, reinforced by deep pockets using and abusing the echo chamber of social media. But if that is the only road ahead, we should not shirk from holding that vote. Come an election or a referendum, I will be making the same arguments again. I firmly believe that it is in Britain's national interest to remain within the European Union with a seat at the table, a vote and sometimes a veto—to reform, where needed, from within, not just to shout from the sidelines without, or, under this deal, to go cap in hand begging for favours in future.

[ENDS]