



*Read the Archbishop of Canterbury's speech today during the House of Lords debate on the withdrawal of Great Britain from the European Union.*

My Lords, of the choice of psalms that form part of daily prayers in the Lords we have Psalm 46, which we heard today: “the nations are in uproar, the kingdoms totter...” and Psalm 121, which we’ll doubtless hear tomorrow: “I lift up my eyes to the hills... My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth...”

Eyes need to be lifted now more than ever. And this is a gift of this House perhaps more than others. It is a skill and calling here.

The Withdrawal Agreement and the Political Declaration are essentially political more than economic. The debate has moved on from the referendum campaign, which was the other way around.

Another change is that, as we know particularly since yesterday evening, the great decisions are now left firmly in the hands of parliament, as is right.

The decision as to this agreement and consequent legislation is thus about not just the immediate politics, but national policy and identity, our future place in the world and how we develop it.

It is long term. For the child born yesterday and not just for parliamentarians today. And it must be made in the interests of those who will be here for the long term.

In the midst of political struggle that is a very hard thing to do. But it is the calling of parliament and one to which it has risen in equal crises in the past.

In what way will we be most able to be the kind of nation we want to be? It is obvious that no agreement is ever final. It was many, many years ago in 1845 that Palmerston said, “We have no eternal alliances, we have only eternal interests.”

So no agreement is final, least of all the Withdrawal Agreement and the Political Declaration, both of which I’ve read in their entirety, which make it clear that so much is left open in deciding our future and our relationships with the EU 27 and around the world. That may be an advantage or a disadvantage.

What is obvious is that we are choosing a new path. For although a Remainer, like the noble Lord, Lord Hope, I fully accept the decision of the referendum, which must now be implemented, and the shape of which is now in the hands of parliament and particularly of the other place.

With that responsibility there is a moral agency and moral choice, and it is that that should guide our votes.

It must reflect a genuinely hopeful vision for our nation and its place, because there is a hope and global influence, a vision of that, to be grasped in this country with proper leadership.

Second, whichever way we go there is a requirement for national reconciliation, for restating what the noble Lord, Lord Sacks, calls core values of civilised discourse, and for ensuring they are lived out.

The negative impact of the previous referendum is why I see another one as a possible but not immediately preferable choice, and then only if parliament has failed in its responsibilities.

Reconciliation is a an area for civil society, for faith groups, but it is also largely the responsibility of any government. It is a process that takes generations and thus will affect not only the current government but subsequent ones.

I wonder what specific commitment will the Noble Baroness the Leader of the House, and for that matter the Noble Baroness, Baroness Smith, and other leaders of groups and parties make to future governments purposefully working on reconciliation in this house and across politics and across the nation?

We have heard much about its need, but nothing about its methods.

Third, economically, there are many and diverse views about the outcome of this agreement, of no agreement, or of other possibilities, and we know that no forecast is certain. That has become very clear over the last two and a half years.

But the risk we face now is not a decision to leave without an agreement: it is an accidental leaving without an agreement. Something that no single person chooses as their ideal.

And if that happens, or even with some of the other options we have, there is a significant danger of adverse economic affect, with a fall in government revenue, rise in unemployment and greater poverty.

Some will argue that that is only going to be temporary, but we need to remember that for those in poverty, temporary is an eternity.

It must be the clear policy of this and all future governments, after so many years of austerity borne most often by the poorest, that the burden of the transition to a post-EU economy, if there is a burden, must be carried by those with the broadest shoulders, the wealthiest, and not by further cuts, whether in local services, social care, benefits, the armed forces, climate change budgets, education or others that have lost so much in recent years.

My Lords, this is not a simply a debate and – in the other place – a decision on the agreement and the declaration that are before us. This is genuinely a moment of national reimagination, exciting and hope-filled, but also deeply dangerous in some ways.

We have had such before; we need not despair. Another verse from the Bible, in the King James version, says “without a vision the people

perish”.

The withdrawal agreement and political declaration are mainly about process, not vision and outcome. Whichever way we go there must be a vision for justice and fairness, in which its economic, its political, and its visionary moral foundations must be secure enough to bear any storms or shocks that may come.

And the process must then lay the foundations to fulfil such vision: and that should be the test of our voting.

5 min read

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