

Read the Archbishop of Canterbury's speech in the House of Lords Brexit debate this afternoon.

Lords reconciliation debate

My Lords, one of the benefits of being a Bishop in the House of Lords is the inherent link to local communities through our dioceses. My own diocese being Canterbury, which covers the eastern end of Kent, I shall start by speaking for a moment about the small picture: about local issues in Kent as an example that applies in many other places that would be exacerbated and strained by the impact of a no-deal Brexit, which serve as a reminder to us all of the seriousness of the challenges we face should we, perhaps by default rather than by design, leave the EU without an agreement.

We have all seen in the media the artificially created traffic blip, rather than traffic jam, which was staged on Monday, albeit with only 89 vehicles. I will point out that in the case of this experiment, the reality we face is much worse.

The Channel ports handle over 10,000 lorries every day, so that 89 represented less than one percent of the flow. Aside from delivery issues, if there are border delays as a result of no-deal, which will of course impact on the rest of the country, in practical terms these lorries will take up an enormous amount of space. Anecdotally, one day's lorry supply would stretch from Dover to Leicester.

Furthermore, if 10,000 lorries are stuck in East Kent daily, there are 10,000 drivers who will need to use the local facilities to eat, drink, go to the bathroom. This will have a major impact on local towns and villages, as we seen in Operation Stack three or four years ago.

Support services will be physically unable to access those in need – that also was our recent experience – if roads are logjammed. People will be unable to get to work. Tourist sites and haulage companies suffer very severely and go out of business, with an increase in unemployment.

Noble Lords might remember the effects of Operation Stack in 2015, after strikes in Calais disrupted thousands of lorries bound for cross-Channel ferries. It cost the local economy one and a half million pounds a day. It cost the country two hundred and fifty million pounds a day. Operation Brock, which will supersede Operation Stack, can only be higher.

Back in 2015 arterial roads across Kent were blocked, which had a significant impact on local communities. 'No man is an island', as John Donne tells us, and significant disruption in one industry will invariably have a knock-on effect across the community and eventually across the country.

That is not project fear, or projected fear. This is an account of what happened in 2015.

Having spoken to local officials I have heard time and time again that Kent does not have the structural capacity to cope with a no-deal Brexit, or time to prepare.

The last time customs checks were made for UK-EU trade (in 1993 before the EU Single Market), there were between 2 million and 2.5 million customs clearance documentation entries.

Since 1993 Dover has seen significant increases in freight, and the Eurotunnel is now also in operation. Consequently, post-Brexit, there could be an estimated 25 million customs clearance documentation entries. Before 1993 there were 300 Customs Officers located in Kent, with 125 at Dover.

There are now only 24 in East Kent, covering both the Port of Dover and the Eurotunnel. In 1993 there were also 185 Customs Clearance Agents to do the paperwork. Today, there are only 17, and only five of them operate a 24-hours-a-day service.

The transition in a no deal may, possibly, be without difficulty. We are assured by those who support it that it will be, and many of the projections of two years ago have not come to pass.

But experience in 2016 and 2015 indicates a very material risk. To take that risk without assured and adequate mitigation is not a moral decision.

This brings me to my second point, about moral responsibility.

The decision is rightly with Parliament, specifically with the other place, but with parliamentary sovereignty comes responsibility for the welfare of those represented and legislated for.

We are facing not just practical choices, but moral decisions alongside our highest responsibility to protect our poorest and most vulnerable. The burden, therefore, must be upon those who believe that no-deal is a reasonable option to take to prove that it would not have a significant negative impact on citizens, like those in the diocese I serve, who already face hardship.

My third key point is on the adversarial nature of the process. The most serious aspect of this is the personalised nature of the threats outside the House against members of the Other Place especially – whether personally, online or other means. These threats have rightly united all sides in being an attack on democracy.

Our Christian heritage, and also the heritage of other faiths and non-faith traditions, calls for us to treat others as we would wish to be treated – the golden rule. Christ himself went on to call for love for enemies. That does not mean the absence of passionate difference, but calls for respect for human dignity.

And that requires active leadership, my Lords, politically and in security means, against such threats, and it must require now – not after 29th March – examples of reconciliation by public figures who have differed most profoundly during this painful process over the last two or three years. That is leadership.

My final point is as to the nature of this decision now. My Lords, it may not feel like it, we may not wish it, but we are still near the beginning of the Brexit journey, not at the end of the process.

The decisions made over the next week will not be finalised for all eternity, but are a foundation for further discussion and negotiation down the line. There has to be an agreement in which all accept the need to deliver 'the will of the people', which was expressed in the referendum, while also recognising that when it was expressed in such a close result there is a duty to build in compromise: an inevitability, albeit unwelcome to some.

If not there will be, by default, a no deal Brexit. That outcome would be not only a political and practical failure, but a moral one equally as serious as ignoring the result of the referendum entirely.

A second referendum is not my preference, but if Parliament fails in the task entrusted to it, then regrettably it may be required. This is about more than Brexit, and Parliament must not show itself unfit for the job.

Parliamentarians must be able to look back at this time and say honestly to the people of this country that we put them, their choices, their welfare and their communities above the politics and ideology that can seem so all-consuming here in Westminster.

As we embrace the challenge, that I believe is hope-filled and exciting, of reimagining our country and its structure over the months and years ahead, I hope politicians will take it upon themselves to make these crucial decisions not only with the grand vision, but also with 'the small picture' – the effect on local people, communities and businesses – in mind as well.

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