

# First steps on a long road

Yesterday, the House of Commons voted by 498 votes to 114 to trigger Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty. This was the first vote and the second reading of the European Union (Notification of withdrawal) Bill, which was published last week. According to the Parliament website, the Bill is provisionally scheduled to be considered in a Committee of the whole House on Monday 6th, Tuesday 7th, and Wednesday 8th February with the Report Stage and Third Reading of the Bill provisionally scheduled to take place on Wednesday 8th February 2017. Mrs May's objective is to be ready to trigger Article 50 on 9th March, which allows a couple of weeks to elapse before the planned celebrations in Italy to mark 60 years since the signing of the Treaty of Rome.

Italy has made it quite clear that triggering Article 50 too close to March 25th's festivities would be regarded as a "hostile act". This is a valid point. We may be delighted to be breaking away from the EU project but what is the point of unnecessarily antagonising the EU-27 at the start of what is going to be a very challenging period for our diplomats, ministers and civil servants? The decision to go for 9th March therefore is a very wise one.

Consequently, the Bill has just over five weeks to clear all the hurdles – scrutiny by the House of Lords and a further vote. The Europhile majority in the Upper Chamber has been highlighted on our website and elsewhere on many occasions, but statements last month by Lord Fowler and Lord Blunkett that it was not Peers' job to go against the will of the people offer some reassurance.

Furthermore, a precedent has been set in the Commons which would be very hard for their Noble Lordships to ignore. Last night, 346 MPs who had supported remaining in the EU during the referendum campaign, including the Prime Minister

herself, voted in favour of triggering Article 50. Some did so reluctantly, but David Davis' challenge to his fellow-MPs was not easy to ignore:- "Do we trust the people or not?"

At this point, it is worth reminding ourselves that were it not for the legal ambiguity of David Cameron's original bill, Parliament would not need to go through all this. The infamous booklet, produced at the taxpayers' expense, which encouraged us to vote to remain, couldn't have been clearer:- "This is your decision. The government will implement what you decide" but our judges decided that an unequivocal promise wasn't good enough.

Even so, yesterday saw a momentous event which many Brexit supporters never thought would happen – a predominantly remain-supporting House of Commons voted to begin a process that will restore our independence. Some did so enthusiastically, especially the pro-leave minority like Owen Paterson who said: "This is irrevocable – we have voted to take back control" or Boris Johnson, who correctly claimed that "History had been made". Others like remainer Nicky Morgan were far more reluctant, on the one hand recognising that the result had to be respected but adding that she would "rather not have been in the situation of having this debate and having to pass this legislation."

Still, at least she did what her party leader and her country mandated her to do so, albeit grudgingly. The same cannot be said of 114 of her parliamentary colleagues. You can study the roll of dishonour here, but in summary, they comprise largely SNP and Labour MPs along with, among others, seven out of the nine Lib Dems, the solitary Green and, notoriously, Ken Clarke, who was the only Conservative MP to rebel against the Government.

We will be keeping tabs on the voting records of MPs during subsequent Article 50-related divisions in the House of Commons, but as far as yesterday was concerned, the prize for

the most absurd comment goes to Lib Dem leader Tim Farron who likened his party's opposition to Brexit with its previous stance against the Iraq war. "I take courage and comfort from that example because I'm as certain as I can be we're in the same kind of place now", he said, adding "We think democracy does not involve lying down and giving up. If you believe in democracy you've got to carry on fighting for it." Perhaps some one should point out to him that June 23rd's vote was, in fact, democracy in action. Unfortunately for Mr Farron, the result didn't turn out the way he hoped and he sadly shows no sign of growing up and getting over it.

On a more serious note – after all, does anyone really take Mr Farron seriously? – the Government has just published a white paper setting out **HOW** it plans to take us out of the EU. This document offers little more than the broad outlines, which we will review and comment on in due course. There is no doubt that it is going to be a challenging process and we can but hope that we do end up with a Brexit deal that will work – for business, for our fishermen and farmers as well as for ordinary people.

But yesterday was significant. In spite of there being further votes in Parliament ahead and legal challenges lurking in the background, our MPs took the first historic steps yesterday on the long road to freedom. Laura Kuenssberg, the BBC's political editor is therefore correct her analysis that yesterday's vote marked "the point of no return". The government therefore has to get Brexit right. Failure is not an option.