



Closing statement by Michel Barnier at the Plenary Session of the European Parliament on the state of play of the negotiations with the United Kingdom

Strasbourg, 3 October 2017

Thank you, President.

At the end of this dense, lively, and lengthy debate, I would first like to thank the European Parliament for the numerous messages of support for the work I have the honour of doing, with the trust of President Juncker and the services of the Commission, as well as with the team of Guy Verhofstadt, all the members of the Brexit Steering Group, and the Presidents of the Groups.

We need this support and trust. We need unity, which the Parliament demonstrates by a vast majority. At the end of this debate – and please forgive me for not replying individually to you as I usually do, even though I did listen carefully to what you have said – I would like to say a few short words.

First, to those who spoke, there are two words which I cannot accept because they are not at all part of my state of mind or attitude. They are: revenge and punishment. I have had the greatest admiration for the United Kingdom for a long time. I often recall that my first vote as a young French citizen in 1972 – at the age of 21 – was to campaign in the French referendum on the accession of the United Kingdom, Ireland, Denmark and Norway. And it was not that easy to do as the young member of the Gaullist party that I was at the time. I never regretted that vote. I have the greatest admiration for your country and – honourable members from the United Kingdom – never, ever will you find the slightest bit of revenge or punishment in my attitude – never!

There is another word, Mr. Farage, that I cannot accept and which you mentioned once again. And that is the word "ransom." There is no ransom. There is no exit bill. There is simply the fact that at the point in time that you leave, we are asking you to settle the accounts. No more, no less. To pay what you have committed to pay.

And I would add that this is an important point if – as you have wished – we are to begin a different, but solid and lasting relationship in trade, security, the fight against terrorism, and defence. We need to have this trust between us if we are to create a lasting relationship in the future. And the key to this trust is that you accept to settle the accounts objectively.

There is something which you have said, ladies and gentlemen, which I do not understand: the idea that I, as a European negotiator, or the European Union as a whole, are delaying things, or are trying to keep the United Kingdom in the Union. Ladies and gentlemen, the referendum in the United Kingdom took place on 23 June 2016. We received Theresa May's letter notifying us of the UK's intention to leave on 29 March 2017. Because of the elections in the UK, we waited until the end of June 2017 to begin the negotiations. We are not using delaying tactics. You took your time, and we respected that, but frankly I cannot accept your criticism. We are ready to intensify the rhythm of the negotiations, as much as necessary.

I would like to quickly run through a few points that should be well understood, or even better understood. The United Kingdom decided to leave the European Union. That was its sovereign decision. It is also leaving – as the UK government made clear – the Single Market and the Customs Union. After 44 years of integration, I would recommend that nobody underestimates the complexity and the legal, human, social, economic, and financial difficulties of this decision. And I recommend that those who made this decision should shoulder the consequences.

A second point: we respect the sovereign choice of the British citizens. We are putting in place the withdrawal that they wanted. We want this withdrawal to be orderly. And for a number of reasons, I think that it is better that you leave the European Union on 30 March 2019 with an agreement, rather than without one. It is in the common interest. We respect this choice. We ask you to respect the European Union. We ask you to respect the fact that we are uncompromising on the integrity of the Single Market, and on the respect of the rules on the functioning and the autonomy of decision-making in the European Union. European Union taxpayers cannot pay for the consequences of Brexit. Brexit cannot weaken the Single Market and the four freedoms, of which they are an intrinsic part.

Finally, all of us, including you honourable members, are elected representatives. We will have to be accountable to our citizens, whose rights are our priority. We will have to be accountable to taxpayers.

We will have to be accountable to businesses. We will also have to be accountable – if I may say so – to those who have built the European Union over the past 60 years, of which we are the co-guarantors and for which we share responsibility. Ladies and gentlemen, I simply want the accounts that we render at the end of this negotiation to be fair and true accounts.

I will not touch upon the different points of the negotiations, as they are currently ongoing. We made some progress, and clarified a lot of points. It is in the general interest to deal with things in stages. We have little time between now and October/November 2018 to reach an agreement on the orderly withdrawal and – as the British government has requested – a possible transition period, for which the conditions have been clearly defined by your resolution in April, again today, and also by the European Council's guidelines.

This period will be short and supervised, and will involve the full regulatory structure, as well as budgetary and legal conditions, and the role of the European Court of Justice. It was your request to have a short transition period. It is our right to say that this will be subject to the conditions of the Single Market. We were not surprised by this request for a transition period. We foresaw it. We will discuss it at the appropriate time, and that time has not yet come. I would need a mandate for this. I would like to tell Mr. Farage a simple legal point: the trade deal you want cannot be signed by a Member State of the Union. You need to have legally left before we sign this trade deal.

Ladies and gentlemen, throughout this process, we hope that the constructive tone that Theresa May adopted in her speech in Florence will be maintained and consolidated, so that we can continue as soon as next week to make more progress. As for me – and the responsibility with which I have been entrusted, and with your continued trust and support over the coming months – I will continue to lead negotiations which will remain dignified, calm and firm on the European Union's principles.

Thank you.

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