Parliamentary oversight of negotiations

Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health Committee

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to be concerned about the fate of British citizens living in the European Union, but I agree with others who have said that, surely, a goodwill gesture would be a really positive thing for this Government to make. Two of my constituents are a married couple who have been living together in this country for 30 years, and I consider the wife to be as British as anybody else. We should make it absolutely clear that it is inconceivable that this couple should be separated, and that their children should be left with separated parents.

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Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health Committee

I wish to start by reading something from a letter I have received from a constituent. He talks about his wife, who was born in the Netherlands. He writes:

"She has lived in this country for over 30 years, brought up three British children and is completely integrated into the life of her local town. She is not part of any 'immigrant community'. She just lives here and is fully at home here. Until now, she has never seen herself as an outsider and has been able to participate fully in local life, thanks to her rights as an EU citizen. In two years' time, she will lose those rights and be a foreigner, dependent on the good will of the Government of the day."

I have written back to and met my constituent, because I think it is inconceivable that our Prime Minister would separate this family. However, many people are not reassured, and he and his wife sought for her to have permanent residency. This involved dealing with an 85-page document, including an English language test and a test about life in Britain, which is insulting to someone who has lived here most of her life and brought up three children here. This process is also very expensive, but the final sting in the tail is that she finds she is not eligible, because she has been self-employed and has not taken out comprehensive sickness insurance. This situation is unacceptable. We need to keep our compassion and keep this simple. It is inconceivable that families such as this would be separated, so we should be absolutely clear in saying so, up front.

Julian Knight Conservative, Solihull

I understand what my hon. Friend is saying about her constituency surgeries. I have had a similar experience and it is deeply upsetting in many respects, but will she join me in reflecting that the EU and Chancellor Merkel could have come to a deal on this earlier? The reality is that they have point-blank refused to discuss it before we trigger article 50.

Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health Committee
I agree with that, and I have also heard from constituents of mine who are British citizens now living in the EU. But my point is that, come what may, it is inconceivable that we would seek to separate families such as this one. There is no doubt that many people are sleepless and sick with worry about this, and we have all seen them in our surgeries. [Interruption.] It is true. I am seeing these people in my surgery. We also need to consider the tsunami of paperwork that we will have to deal with in settling the rights of these citizens if we do not get on with this quickly. We need to keep this simple. There is no way that families such as this should be subjected to a vast bureaucracy and vast expense. We all know that this needs to be settled, so in negotiating, surely, making a bold, open offer as a gesture of good will can do nothing but good in this situation.

Richard Fuller Conservative, Bedford

I agree with my hon. Friend, but my question to her is: can she cast any thought on why the Chancellor of Germany refused the offer?

Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health Committee

I have no idea why this is happening, but I am saying, as an important point to the Chancellor of Germany, that making this clear unilateral offer is the right thing to do, and we should get on and do it. There is no reason not to do so. Even if other countries were to take an obstructive and unreasonable line, it would still be inconceivable that our Prime Minister would separate families such as my constituents. So let us get on with this.

Anna Soubry Conservative, Broxtowe

Does my hon. Friend not agree that the Prime Minister as given her word that this will be a priority and she clearly hears the compassion that my hon. Friend reflects for her constituent, as we all do for all our constituents? We must, as I certainly do, accept the word of the Prime Minister that this will be her priority and that she will sort it.

Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health Committee

I thank my hon. Friend for that. Like her, I do trust the Prime Minister, and that is why I have taken a very reassuring line with my constituents. However, there is no substitute for a clear statement from our Prime Minister that, come what may, families such as this will not be separated, because that is the reassurance they seek. I hear what my hon. Friend says, but I think we should get on and make that offer, because it can be nothing but good to do so.

I also hope the Prime Minister will take further action on the issue of those who work in our NHS and social care. One in 10 of the doctors who works in our NHS comes from elsewhere in the EU, and I would like to say thank you, on behalf of the whole House, to all those workers and to all those who are working in social care. It would also be very much a positive move if we could say, up front, that those who are working here will be welcome to stay and make it very clear that we will continue to make it easy to welcome people from across the EU to work in social care and in our NHS.

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