

The UK should lead freer trade worldwide

I have made two consistent requests of the UK government whilst I have watched the negotiators reach an Agreement Parliament could not possibly accept. I have asked that the UK tables a comprehensive free trade agreement with the EU and says we should negotiate it once we have left, allowing both sides to avoid any new barriers or tariffs whilst we negotiate it. I have also asked that the UK tables its own schedule of tariffs for April 2019 assuming the EU refuses all co-operation. These tariffs should be lower than those imposed by the EU on the rest of the world, thereby cutting our tariffs on the bulk of our trade whilst imposing them on EU trade for the first time as we have to under WTO rules.

There are two advantages of tabling a draft Free Trade Agreement. The first is the EU has indicated that would be easier to agree with the UK than a half in half out arrangement of the kind the present UK negotiators seem to want. The EU has free trade agreements with various smaller countries already and has just managed one with Japan. Our draft should be based on the best of the EU/ Canada and Japan agreements, so we can say to them we are only asking for what they have already granted to others. They and we might then want to add some more to that. The second is we could then under Article 24 of Gatt/WTO agree to no new barriers pending agreement. This would be especially advantageous to the rest of the EU given their huge surplus with us in food and cars, where tariffs would otherwise be imposed.

The ERG is working with experts to produce a full legal text draft. I look forward to its early publication, as then the government could just table that one if they still have not drafted one of their own. The government could itself produce a scissors and paste version of the EU/Canada or EU/Japan treaties to get the conversation started.

I have also repeatedly asked for publication of our own tariff schedule. I think EU tariffs are in some cases too high. I would want us to remove all tariffs from imported components so we can say to industrialists based here it will be cheaper to make things once we have left. I would like us to remove tariffs on food we cannot grow for ourselves. I would suggest lowering other food tariffs a bit. It is an important judgement to balance consumer interests in no tariffs with farmers interest in some tariff protection, which would for the first time extend to protection against EU as well as non EU produce.

The publication is essential for two reasons. The first is we may well leave with no Withdrawal and future partnership agreement in March, so farmers and traders need to know what the tariff regime will look like when they decide what to grow and what to buy from world markets. It would also be a timely reminder to the big food exporting industries of the rest of the EU that they will face tariff barriers in default of a Free Trade Agreement, which might make them keener on a Free Trade Agreement.

The government should also tell us how it will spend all the extra tariff revenue it could collect. A mixture of spending increases and tax cuts would provide a welcome boost to the economy, jobs and wages.

Another round of Project fear

It is strange to read stories coming from people in or close to the government telling us leaving without a deal will be bad, saying the government has not done all it needs to do to leave on March 29, and playing up any bad economic or business news that comes along. Normally governments are guilty of putting too optimistic a spin on events. Not this one, who often seem to prefer the EU spin line against us.

Most of it is Project Fear re heated. It was that very Project Fear replete with precise and wildly wrong forecasts for jobs, house prices, growth and business for 2016-17 that did much to lose the vote for Remain. Most of us want sensible optimism not remorseless and inaccurate pessimism.

The Prime Minister and government has had 2 years 7 months to get everything ready to leave on March 29. They have told us officially they can do that, though there are plenty of leaks, hints, statements of individual off message Ministerial opinion saying the opposite. The PM has always been consistent in saying we will leave on 29 March with or without a deal. She has always said you cannot take no deal off the table as it is important to the negotiation, and has always said we can just leave if necessary. She of course would much prefer a deal, but has difficulty persuading MPs her Withdrawal Agreement is acceptable. It is of an expensive invitation to another 21 months of talks about a future relationship. This prolongs the uncertainty for business and delays an economic boost from spending our former EU contributions on our priorities.

It is clear the planes will fly, the trucks will pass through Calais and Dover in good time and there will be no food or drug shortages. I am not going to stockpile anything. It looks as if the pressure for a second referendum has abated, which anyway cannot be held before 29 March now. The Remain forces in Parliament now want delay. They have failed to say what we could agree after March that we have been unable to agree in the 2 years 9 months since the vote, and failed to spell out why the EU would let us have a delay to renegotiate and on what terms. The UK has no plans to offer candidates for the European parliament so will not be part of the full governance arrangements of the EU from that date. We need to get on with leaving. I am still pressing the UK government to offer a free trade agreement and use of Article 24 of the GATT to avoid tariffs and other new barriers when we leave in March

Working throughout February

I had no plans to take a holiday and was intending to work as normal when Parliament planned a February recess. I am very willing to attend Parliament to do anything to ensure a smooth exit from the EU on 29 March on any dates between now and then.

An unhappy Euro area and a squeezed car industry

The news that hundreds or even 2000 people have now been injured in the French protests is worrying. There have been at least 10 deaths, according to press reports. There is also a controversy raging in France over the use of police weapons.

It seems to be true that the police themselves have suffered in these protests and have experienced injuries. They are allowed to use guns that fire large rubber bullets, and to release grenade type crowd control devices that contain explosives and scatter more rubber bullets on detonation. There have been cases of people losing part of their hand from these explosions, and reports of blinded and injured eyes from the bullets.

The gilet jaune protests began against high and rising fuel taxes. The symbol and uniform of the protesters is the gilet jaune that all car drivers have to carry in their vehicle to wear in case of emergency. It is an irony that a protest which is part a protest about the attacks on motorists should use as its symbol an item of clothing demanded by a regulatory requirement. It makes it impossible for the authorities to ban carrying such items or using them by displaying them prominently in a car as a symbol of support for the movement.

Meanwhile Italy is in recession and Germany had a fall in output in the third quarter, with a weak fourth quarter as well. Economies are crying out for some stimulus. The motor industry has been particularly hard hit by restrictive credit policies and by tax attacks on the purchase, owning and use of vehicles. EU emission rules changes disrupted production and sales, and Chinese demand for German cars fell away quickly.

Even the UK industry has suffered from all this, which isn't anything to do with Brexit and has happened before we have been allowed to leave the EU. In the UK high VED increases, a squeeze on car loans and threats of more bans

and taxes on diesel vehicles has as predicted here cut output and sales and slashed investment. The UK government should put together a better tax and regulatory package to stabilise and improve sales and output before more damage is done.

Better healthcare

I am taking an interest in how the extra money for the NHS will be spent. It is most important that NHS England comes up with a proper plan of what they are trying to achieve by way of expansion and service improvements, so they can then test out how many extra staff they may need and what new contracts they should sign to deliver the better healthcare.

I understand that the Health Secretary is engaged on just such an exercise. I would be interested to hear from people, especially constituents, on what would be sensible requests for spending this additional cash. My priorities include wanting a well staffed GP service locally so that patients can get appointments that are timely and GPs feel they have manageable workloads so they can provide the best possible service. I think we do need some more hospital capacity for the most common procedures to reduce waiting times and provide some choice and flexibility for patients over when and where they receive treatment.

Local services need to be expanded to reflect the additional homes and increase in population. I share the government's wish to see better mental health provision where there are proven protocols and treatments that can make a difference to people in need of help.

The government is considering the role of technology in future medical services and care. How far do patients want to go with digital booking, or even remote consultations? I am keen that this should be based on patient preference rather than a mandatory conversion, as healthcare is a private and individual matter where the patient needs to feel happy with the system. Patients need to trust the doctor and the way he or she works for it stand most chance of being a success.