

Food and trade

On Wednesday I had booked slots to speak on the Amendments to the Agriculture Bill about trade, and on Third Reading where I wished to discuss how we promote more home grown and home reared food. I joined the debate remotely and listened to it, only to discover they had booked more slots than available spaces. I was not called on the Amendments, and the 3rd Reading debate lasted for 3 minutes, front benches only. So let me tell you some of what I wanted to say. My views are being sent to ministers as well.

I want us to have more free trade agreements and high standards of food production. I see no need to accept food from countries with unacceptable animal welfare practices, nor to lower our standards in order to secure a Free Trade deal. More importantly, the government has promised it will not dilute our current standards. Free Trade Agreements with other countries will need Parliamentary approval and will be properly reported and debated in the House. It is common in Free Trade Agreements to respect each other's regulatory systems through the doctrine of equivalence, where there is possible. Where it is not then the trade continues under WTO rules.

The government has decided to keep certain EU permitted practises for the time being, though one of the wins from leaving the EU is we can impose our own higher standards where we wish. We will, for example, continue with rules which allow chlorine wash of salads and vegetables. The EU disagreement over chlorine washed chicken is not with the chlorine washes which they accept. Do those who object strongly to US chicken wish to see us ban chlorine washes for other items?

The government is pledged to maintaining levels of financial support to farmers that they were receiving under the EU policy, but to spend the money differently. The Bill grants powers to allow the government to support investment in better food production and requires the government to consider and report on food self sufficiency levels. I want the government to have ambitious plans to promote much bigger output of fruit, vegetables and flowers here at home by providing financial and regulatory support for more greenhouses and more mechanised market gardening. We also need to recruit more local labour to help with this important industry.