

Free trade

My critics have complained that in recent years I have urged the UK to make and grow more of the things it needs at home. I have been accused of resiling from a belief in free trade all assumed I had. Let me reassure. I accept that free trade does increase the prosperity of all embracing it. My problem with it has always been that so few practise it. There are many countries and big companies that see a nation or company that practises free trade as weak, an opportunity to exploit. It is important not to be a naive free trader.

My own industrial experience reminded me how difficult it is to find others who play by free trade rules. When I helped take an industrial group into China to sell product there to our global customers who were establishing factories we soon found product circulating copied from ours without permission and even found a case where someone else's product was being sold in lookalike packaging with our brand name on. When we sought to take one of our technology advances into Germany, offering to joint venture with them to gain wider access to their market there was no deal. The players bought single copies of our product to see what they could learn and apply to their own without needing our assistance or joint investment.

Many US and UK companies have had difficult experiences with China, where joint ownership structures and investment vehicles are required and used to transfer technology. Today we see how dangerous it is for countries and companies that have come to rely on Russian energy or other necessities. There is a sudden disruption to supply brought on by bad conduct by the counter party country.

The UK promotes free trade where it can, and works closely with the WTO to bring it about. The UK also needs however to be worldly wise and cautious about trusting some foreign jurisdictions too much. If they are not themselves equally pledged to play by the rules and accept the give and take successful free trade needs we should not make it easy for them to cheat. EU managed trade was not very free or fair for us in many areas including fish and farm products. We should promote multilateral free trade, whilst taking care to build sufficient national resilience in crucial areas that are especially prone to disruption.