

Statement to Parliament: Creating a transparent and inclusive future trade policy

Introduction

Mr Speaker, in October of last year my Department published a White Paper, Preparing for our future UK trade policy, in which we set out the Government's commitment to the transparency and inclusiveness in our future trading arrangements.

The Paper also set out our intention to boost our trade relationships with old friends and new allies, expanding access to markets across the globe.

Today I can set out the role of Parliament, the Devolved Administrations, the public, business and civil society, and how the government intends to engage with these groups, as we embark on our new international trade agreements to benefit the whole of the UK and ensure we meet our commitments to an inclusive and transparent trade policy.

A transparent and inclusive future trade policy

Mr Speaker, scrutiny of our future trade arrangements is vitally important as we take powers back from the EU into UK law, and begin negotiating our own new free trade agreements.

I would like, at this stage, to make a distinction between our FTAs with new partners, to which this statement relates, and continuity trade agreements – those being legislated for in the Trade Bill tomorrow and to which the Customs Bill powers being debated today will also apply.

With this distinction in mind, for our new FTA's, we will now put in place a structured approach to engagement to provide clarity on how stakeholders can feed into this vital work that will help shape the trading future of our country.

To ensure that our new agreements and our future trade policy work for the whole of the UK, it is my strongly held view that Parliament, the devolved administrations, local government, business, trade unions, civil society, and the public from every part of the UK must have the opportunity to engage and contribute.

On Parliament specifically, Mr Speaker, the Government is committed to providing Parliament with the ability to inform and scrutinise new trade agreements in a timely and appropriate manner. I want to set out how this will be achieved.

We will ensure that Parliamentarians are given the opportunity to consider

the level of ambition of the Government's approach to negotiations and the potential implications of any agreements. We will explore the correct process to do this, which could take the form of a general debate;

In addition, the Government will keep both Houses updated on the progress of negotiations through statements and updates to the International Trade Committee as the negotiations progress. This will include timely analysis at appropriate points to support decision-making. Of course, as in any negotiation, a certain level of confidentiality will be necessary to help ensure the best outcome for the UK, and these updates will be given with that in mind;

At the end of a negotiation, the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 will continue to apply as it does to all treaties which are subject to ratification;

Under CRaG, the Government will lay before Parliament any treaties it intends to ratify alongside an Explanatory Memorandum which will summarise the content of each trade agreement;

And, consistent with past practice with any new international trade partners, the Government will also, at the appropriate time, publish an impact assessment;

In order to implement a new trade agreement with a new partner, the Government will bring forward a bespoke piece of primary legislation, when required, for each new future trade agreement that requires changes to legislation and where there are no existing powers. Parliament will therefore have the opportunity to scrutinise this new legislation in the normal way.

Mr Speaker, I believe that this process will strengthen Parliament's ability to shape and scrutinise the Government's ambitious independent trade policy agenda and our new free agreements with partners around the world.

The Devolved Administrations

To develop and deliver a UK trade policy that benefits business, workers and consumers across the whole of the UK we need to reflect the needs and individual circumstances of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

We will work closely with the Devolved Administrations on an ongoing basis to deliver an approach that works for the whole of the UK. As part of this, we are conducting a series of collaborative policy roundtables with Devolved Administrations and key stakeholders in all parts of the country, which will draw on their knowledge and expertise, recognising their role in helping to deliver the objectives of our trade policy and future negotiations. We will ensure that the Devolved Administrations are able to inform the government's approach to negotiations throughout the consultation period and, of course, with subsequent engagement throughout the entire negotiation process.

We will also engage more widely in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, holding meetings with a wide range of stakeholder groups.

And Mr Speaker, let us not forget the English regions, whose involvement in this process is also of vital importance and who, from the North East to the South West make a huge contribution to our trading performance. They too will be fully involved.

The public, business and civil society

As we prepare to begin negotiating future trade agreements once we leave the EU, we also want groups and any individuals with an interest to have their say and inform our approach to negotiations.

Our White Paper asked how the government should seek views from the public, business, trade unions and civil society. We were grateful to receive thousands of responses.

The responses made clear the need to move to a more formalised engagement structure so that stakeholders are clearer on when and how they can input into the process and how their information will be used.

It is therefore so important that we ensure that the public, and wider stakeholders, have access to this process online – to make sure that we reach the widest range of people possible, both in terms of diversity and geography.

My department will also convene a Strategic Trade Advisory Group, to bring expert external insight to trade policy making and advise ministers. We are inviting expressions of interest for membership and will appoint 14 members, based on their technical expertise, to take seats on the group. We will ensure the group represents the varied interests of business, workers, consumers and NGOs in all parts of the UK. More details can be found on the [DIT gov.uk](http://DIT.gov.uk) pages.

Mr. Speaker, I have said that all stakeholders and members of the public must be able to inform the government's approach, and that is why we will launch public consultations for each potential new trade agreement.

If we are to learn the lessons from agreements such as TTIP, we need to ensure that people are able to express their views and feel that they have been taken into account. I want people to feel invested in this process and that the benefits of free trade are shared across the length and breadth of the UK.

This is also why the government's consultations will last for 14 weeks, giving everyone the opportunity to share their objectives and any concerns about potential new agreements. I will update the House on potential agreements that will be subject to consultation in the coming days.

My ministerial colleagues and I will continue to meet with representatives from business and civil society and my officials will continue to welcome technical policy discussions with a broad range of experts. We will also hold a range of outreach events to engage with stakeholders across the whole of the UK.

Conclusion

Mr. Speaker, the views gathered through the Government's consultation and engagement will ensure an informed and well evidenced approach to each of our trade negotiations.

I can confirm that before entering formal negotiations, we intend to publish an 'Outline Approach' to each negotiation, setting out the high-level objectives and scope of that negotiation. This document will be accompanied by a scoping assessment.

As I have said many times, the decision to leave the European Union was not a decision to retreat from the world. In fact, we need to embrace it – to trade more not less, fight protectionism and break down the barrier to trade wherever we find them.

As agreed at the European Council meeting in March, the UK will be able to begin to negotiate new trade agreements from April 2019. It is therefore right that we set out how we intend to gather views from across the country now, to inform the Government's approach to new trade negotiations, before those talks begin, and as they progress to conclusion.

As we decide our own trade policy for the first time in over 40 years, I'm sure members of this House will agree that it is only right that we all get a say. I am confident our proposals will deliver the scrutiny and transparency that the UK public, including Parliament, expect and deserve and I commend this statement to the house.