

The Trade Bill and trade deals

I have received copies of a couple of lobby letters being sent round asking me to support proper Parliamentary scrutiny of trade deals. Let me put minds at rest. Parliament has debated trade more thoroughly and more often in the last four years than in the four decades of our membership of the EU.

Parliament is debating trade yet again today as we continue our scrutiny of the government's legislative framework for our post EU trade policy. We were never offered primary legislation or extensive scrutiny of the many tariffs and rules imposed during our membership of the EU. There was of course little point in Parliament debating the tariffs and controls imposed on us during those years, as they resulted from directly acting regulations of the Commission, or from Directives decided by qualified majority vote which we might have lost or agreed to reluctantly.

Any future trade deal will be discussed, examined and debated extensively by Parliament. It may well need legislation which will have to go through both Houses with more extensive scrutiny and with votes for those who dislike any such Agreement. There is no need today to vote for an amendment which requires more scrutiny as there will be more scrutiny. It is not a good idea for Parliament to try to fix its own future agenda in law. The truth is if a majority of MPs want something to be debated or wish to stop something the government is proposing, they will do so. Governments can only enter trade treaties or make other decisions all the time they command a majority. To continue to command such a majority they need to persuade enough MPs on each measure that they deserve support.

Some rightly argue we need high animal welfare standards. One of the advantages of coming out of the EU is we can set higher standards, as we were usually arguing for higher standards within the EU against considerable resistance from some countries. It took longer than we wanted to improve conditions for hens, and to ease veal crate conditions for example. It is strange his some people think it is both critical we have a Free Trade Agreement with the EU and equally critical we do not have one with the USA. The truth is FTAs with both could be helpful if they are good deals, but we can trade without one If necessary as we have had to with the USA for all our time in the EU.