

The UK offer for talks

The Prime Minister's letter yesterday to Mr Juncker offered sustained talks for a new Agreement in the next few days, and proposed a way through the difficulty of the Irish backstop.

It also said something more significant that has enjoyed scant attention. It said "the backstop acted as a bridge to a proposed future relationship with the EU in which the UK would be closely integrated with EU customs arrangements and would align with EU law in many areas. That future relationship is not the goal of the current UK government. The government intends that the future relationship should be based on a Free Trade Agreement in which the UK takes control of its own regulatory affairs and trade policy"

The government seeks a major rewrite of the Political declaration to reflect this different future relationship. It leaves open the other issues surrounding the existing Withdrawal Agreement, which would need to be changed to avoid its provisions stifling the intent of a genuine Brexit with a possible Free Trade Agreement for the future relationship.

The government is right that the most objectionable feature of the old Withdrawal Agreement is the way the Irish situation is used to lock the UK into large areas of EU law for the future, alongside the close subservient relationship envisaged. There is a long way to go to get an Agreement which does allow a proper Brexit, but the very different approach to where we wish to go is most welcome. I have urged successive governments to just table a Free Trade Agreement and then leave, with GATT 24 allowing tariff free trade on departure if the EU agrees to such talks.