

Trade Secretary lays groundwork for independent seat at WTO

The UK is finalising preparations to become an independent member of World Trade Organization (WTO), taking back control of its trade policy for the first time in 46 years.

International Trade Secretary Liz Truss is attending the WTO Public Forum in Geneva today (Wednesday 9 October) to meet with business leaders and senior trade figures including WTO Director General Roberto Azevêdo.

Ms Truss will speak at an event hosted by the International Chamber Commerce, attended by British businesses including BT and Anglo American, and representative organisations like Make UK.

She will urge British business leaders to engage more with the WTO to continue improving the global trade rules and ensure the organisation continues to support an open and predictable global trading environment.

The government's top priorities at the WTO after Brexit include working with other members to agree new rules on issues that matter to British businesses and households, like digital trade; improving transparency so that British businesses have the information they need on other members' trade rules; and working to make sure trade disputes are settled in the most effective way to provide certainty and stability for world trade.

The UK has been amongst the most vocal supporters of free trade and has made the case for WTO reform at both the G7 and G20 this year.

Speaking ahead of the visit, International Trade Secretary Liz Truss said:

After 46 years, Britain is on the verge of taking back control of its trade policy and will take its own seat at the table. We live in an increasingly protectionist world and it is vitally important – now more than ever – that Britain and other WTO members fly the flag for free trade.

Britain is back and we will be undeterred in making the case for lower barriers to trade, for lower tariffs and the rules-based system. This approach will see our citizens across the globe prosper.

International Trade Secretary Liz Truss' first WTO address, at the International Chamber of Commerce Global Dialogue on Trade Reform.

Britain & free trade

We know that free trade, facilitated by the rules based multilateral trading

system, is an engine of global growth and prosperity.

When the UK leaves the EU later this month, we will have a golden opportunity to determine our own trade policy for the first time in almost half a century and retake our seat at the WTO as a fully independent, sovereign nation.

And we will use our new-found freedom to champion free, fair, rules-based international trade with the WTO at its centre.

Because there is no greater ally of the WTO than the United Kingdom.

From the repeal of the corn laws in 1846, to hosting the world's first industrial revolution, to being one of the original signatories of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, signed here in Geneva in 1947, the UK has long been a champion of free trade and trade liberalisation.

For those of you worried about where we might have been for 45 years, let me reassure you Britain is back.

Some may be content to live in a world of rising trade tensions and tit-for-tat tariffs, a world in which, for example, the good people of America are deprived of the chance to sample excellent Scotch whisky.

But this is not a world that I want to see, and when we take our independent seat around the WTO table, I can assure you we will be unapologetic in fighting the forces of protectionism, in favour of genuinely free trade.

Reforming and modernising the WTO

Since its inception, the WTO has been the ultimate heavyweight freedom fighter for a multilateral approach to trade liberalisation and a more prosperous world.

But though successful in many bouts, the WTO now needs to prepare for the new battles of the modern globalised world.

I would like to see reform of the dispute settlement system, and I was encouraged that at both of the major G20 and G7 summits this year, world leaders committed to addressing this issue.

President Trump has said he wants the WTO to modernise, and I agree. We must work together to resolve the Appellate Body impasse and we fully support the Walker process aimed at finding solutions that all members can be happy with.

In particular, we should look to ensure that time limits are met for Appellate Body adjudication on appeals to avoid future unauthorised overrunning of cases.

And clarification must be made that the Appellate Body's role in jurisdiction should be constrained to issues of law, and not drift into reviewing issues of fact.

There is also an urgent need to strengthen the rules on industrial subsidies,

state-owned enterprises and forced technology transfer. Addressing these issues will not only level the playing field for the vast majority of member states, it will help tackle the underlying tensions which threaten the survival of our global trading norms.

And as the world's second largest services exporter, and Europe's preeminent destination for tech investment, it will come as no surprise that the UK is particularly interested in the WTO's work in services and digital trade.

We believe it is high time to reform digital trade rules so that they are fit for the 21st century, reducing restrictions to market access to support e-commerce and ensure the free flow of data across borders.

We also want to see progress in the fisheries subsidies negotiation, tackling the causes of illegal fisheries, over-fishing and overcapacity.

As an island nation of seafarers and fishermen, the UK has a strong interest in this area. Indeed, one of the key arguments made for leaving the EU was to reinvigorate our fishing industries— and we want to see fair and effective rules in force.

We also intend to work with all WTO Members to foster greater transparency in our global system, as part of our commitment to free and fair cross-border trade.

We would like to see more progress on domestic regulation in services, investment facilitation, supporting micro, small and medium-sized enterprises and especially on advancing e-commerce.

And we intend to engage meaningfully with our partners in each of these areas prior to the next WTO Ministerial Conference in Kazakhstan in June 2020.

Delivering on our aims

So there is much to do – and in the UK, the WTO has a steadfast friend. Britain can be relied upon to be a strong voice in all these discussions: both here in Geneva and through our global networks.

We will be leveraging our strong bilateral relationships with other major world powers and we will be using our leading roles in international fora to drive the change we want to see.

For instance, tomorrow in London, I will be making the case that the Commonwealth can be a powerful voice in supporting the rules-based international system.

The Commonwealth's 53 member states comprise 2.4 billion people with a shared heritage, shared values and a shared desire to drive prosperity. I believe this historic organisation represents a real opportunity to remake the case for free trade within the multilateral system that we all depend on.

Working together

It is up to all of us not to pull our punches, and fight the siren calls of protectionism with all our might.

But Governments can't do it alone. That's why the work of the International Chamber of Commerce is vital in championing this cause.

Whether it's setting rules for buyers and sellers around the world; providing leadership on the biggest global issues like climate change and sustainability; or your important role as the leading arbitration institution, the ICC is on the front line in the world's trading battles.

It will take time, energy and determination, but by working together, I am confident we can deliver a knockout blow to the forces of protectionism and usher in a new golden era of free trade. In all these fights ahead, Britain is in your corner.