

Briefing for Commons report stage of the Trade Bill

20 July 2020

Greener UK is asking MPs to support and vote for the following amendments:

- Parliamentary approval of trade agreements **(NC4)**
- Import of agricultural goods after IP completion day **(NC11)**
- International trade agreements: climate and environmental goals **(NC9)**

Summary

Greener UK welcomes the government's manifesto commitment that in trade negotiations it "will not compromise on our high environmental protection, animal welfare and food standards".¹ However we remain of the view that without key amendments to the Trade Bill the government will not achieve its aim, nor will it have in place an approach to trade that is fit for purpose. Current UK trade policy relies on outdated public and parliamentary scrutiny, and is oblivious to the need to align trade with measures to reduce global carbon emissions and reverse biodiversity decline.

Trade relationships have the potential to impact on environmental conditions and protections both in the UK and abroad. In order to realise the government's ambitions of global environmental leadership, it is vital that the UK designs a new trade policy that is innovative and responsive to the needs of the 21st Century. In particular, the UK's trade policy must be compatible with addressing the global climate and nature crisis as well as working to achieve the government's plans to "deliver a UK and world economy which is stronger, cleaner, more sustainable and more resilient after this [Covid-19] crisis".²

Rigorous, transparent scrutiny of trade deals is essential for the government to have the support and confidence of businesses, NGOs and society as a whole. Yet the bill fails to set out an adequate framework for the scrutiny of trade policy.

Greener UK is asking MPs to support and vote for the key amendments below, and to press the minister for clarification on how the government will achieve sustainable trade if the Trade Bill is not amended to provide a clearer and more robust legal framework.

Ensuring parliamentary scrutiny of trade agreements (NC4)

Greener UK supports this amendment, which ensures that trade negotiations and agreements receive adequate parliamentary scrutiny. As enshrined in the Aarhus Convention, the public must be involved in decision-making relating to the environment: this is fundamental to the proper functioning of environmental democracy.

Currently, the UK government can negotiate and ratify Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) without guaranteeing MPs a vote on whether to approve or reject trade deals. Parliament does not have powers to scrutinise ongoing FTA negotiations or to propose amendments, and civil society has no right of input. Devolved governments also currently have no say

in deals despite the potentially significant implications for devolved powers and competencies in areas such as the environment.

Trade policy should be developed in a way that is transparent, democratic, builds consensus and is a benefit to all. Adding scrutiny provisions to the Trade Bill would give an opportunity for constituents, businesses, and NGOs to engage more actively with the negotiation process, through working with parliamentarians. The Trade Bill is currently the only legislative vehicle for needed improvements to scrutiny in light of new agreements already being negotiated. This is why forward-looking amendments have been ruled in scope, despite the bill relating to 'rollover' agreements.

Therefore, Greener UK supports NC4, which:

- Guarantees a debate and vote in parliament on the negotiation objectives, before negotiations begin (*sub-clause 1*)
- Requires the government to report on how the deal will affect regulations, including on food standards and the environment, and to publish a Sustainability Impact Assessment (*sub-clauses 2 & 4*)
- Guarantees a debate and vote on the final deal, after negotiations (*sub-clause 3*)

Greener UK also supports amendments NC1, NC2, NC3 and NC10.

Further information about these amendments is set out in a [briefing](#) by the Trade Justice Movement.

Safeguarding our import standards (NC11)

Greener UK supports this amendment, which requires that agricultural goods imported after implementation period completion day meet UK animal welfare, environmental, food safety and other standards.

It is essential that the UK does not offshore its environmental impacts and undermine its domestic producers by allowing goods produced to low environmental standards to be readily imported into the UK to the detriment of existing high British standards. Polling shows there is unequivocal public support for maintaining our current food standards when it comes to pesticides, antibiotics and other products.³

However, this amendment must be complemented by similar approaches in other areas. Import restrictions on low-quality goods are not only necessary to protect UK farmers, but also to fight against downward pressure on environmental standards in the UK. While particularly salient for food, rules are also needed to help reduce the UK's footprint when it comes to other products such as chemicals and manufacturing.

The recently announced 'Trade and Agriculture Commission' shows how the government is failing to take the environmental implications of trade seriously. Members consist largely of farming organisations while the chair has already defended existing government policy. There are currently no guarantees that the government will follow the recommendations of the Commission, nor that negotiators will not make concessions prior to the Commission's report. The Commission's ability to make credible recommendations on how to protect our environmental standards will be severely hampered unless its remit, lifespan and membership are expanded.

Therefore, Greener UK supports NC11, which:

- Requires that agricultural imports meet UK standards at the time of import, with regards to animal health and welfare, environmental, plant health, food safety and other standards (*sub-clause 1*)
- Requires that the Secretary of State prepare a register of these standards, which must be met in the production of any imported agricultural goods (*sub-clause 2*)

In previous debates it has been suggested that such an amendment might be incompatible with global trade rules or prevent the UK from trading with nations in the Global South. This is incorrect. Trade rules enshrine the right of nations to regulate, and to require that goods and services reach specific standards for import as long as these requirements are applied fairly. Existing trade approaches also routinely include exceptions, additional support and transitional periods to ensure that nations in the Global South are not treated inequitably.

Ensuring international trade agreements align with climate and environmental goals (NC9)

Greener UK strongly supports this amendment, which ensures that FTAs the UK government negotiates and agrees to are consistent with its ambitions and obligations for climate and the environment. Achieving the UK's environmental goals, including net zero by 2050 and those in the 25-year environment plan, requires action across all areas of policy, including trade.

The risks to the environment from poor trade policies are considerable. FTAs can promote the import of cheaper and higher carbon goods, effectively offshoring the UK's emissions and undermining its international climate obligations. They can also allow overseas interests and investors to water down or challenge domestic legislation that is brought in to protect the environment or embed ambitious climate measures.

Without a trade policy that is aligned with the UK's climate and environmental agenda, future trade agreements could present a significant risk to the achievement of our domestic ambitions and could undermine the competitiveness of UK businesses working hard to lower their environmental and carbon footprint.

This amendment would achieve a greater alignment of the UK's trade policy with the UK's climate and environmental commitments as well as ensuring competitiveness of UK businesses working hard to lower their environmental and carbon footprint.⁴

Therefore, Greener UK supports amendment NC9, which:

- Stipulates that an international trade agreement may not be ratified or implemented if it restricts the UK's ability to pursue its climate and environmental goals (*sub-clauses 1-3*)
- Requires the government to prioritise nations fully implementing multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) in negotiations, and facilitate action at the WTO (*sub-clause 4*)
- Requires regular reporting on compliance with the above (*sub-clause 7*)

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Endnotes

- ¹ Conservative Party 2019 [manifesto](#) p.57
- ² [Our plan to rebuild: The UK Government's COVID-19 recovery strategy](#), Cabinet Office, 12 May 2020
- ³ [Report on UK attitudes to trade and food standards](#), YouGov, June 2020
- ⁴ [Aligning the UK's trade policy with its climate and environmental goals](#), Aldersgate group, June 2020

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