

U.K. Parliament to be ‘Shut Out’ of Post Brexit Trade Deals

Trade Justice Movement response to Trade White Paper

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The Trade Justice Movement has welcomed the government’s recognition in its trade white paper, released yesterday, of the need for trade policy to be “transparent and inclusive”. However it has criticised the government’s commitments so far as woefully inadequate, in particular the lack of any clear role for parliament in scrutinising trade deals.

The white paper outlines the government’s approach to trade policy and the contents of the forthcoming trade bill, a cornerstone of its planning for Brexit. Trade deals today have profound effects across the full range of domestic policy – health, environment, jobs, inequality, and climate.

As a result, trade campaigners have been calling for a democratic and transparent process for negotiating and agreeing trade deals after Brexit, with parliamentary oversight at its heart. So far 90 MPs have signed Early Day Motion 128 in parliament in support of the campaign.

The campaigners criticise the white paper on two main counts:

- While campaigners are calling for a clear legislative framework that guarantees the role of Parliament in trade policy, the white paper speaks only of the need to “engage” with “stakeholders” and consult (page 22-23; page 28).
- The white paper mentions the need to “continue to respect the role of Parliament” (page 22). Yet it also hints at giving executive powers to ministers to adopt and implement trade deals after Brexit (page 28).

Matt Grady of Traidcraft said:

“There must be more than vague nods to accountability in the Trade Bill. There needs to be full scrutiny and a parliamentary vote on all trade deals.”

Mark Dearn of War on Want said:

“To date, the government, in particular Trade Secretary Liam Fox, has shown utter disdain for parliamentary scrutiny of trade deals. It failed to allow MPs to read controversial TTIP texts until six months after Brexit, while Fox admitted side-stepping parliament to pass the EU-Canada deal, CETA. If the government is serious about respecting parliament’s role in trade deals it must radically change its secretive approach.”

Jean Blaylock of the Trade Justice Movement said:

“It is unacceptable to put in place such far reaching trade deals without scrutiny, debate and vote by MPs. To refer to some deals as transitional does not mean they should be rushed through by executive decree. As it stands MPs are shut out of the process – they have no power to vote to stop a trade deal. This cannot be described as taking back control.”

Nick Dearden of Global Justice Now said:

“Trade deals have regularly been used as a way of prising open public services and local markets while protecting big corporations. So unless trade deals are controlled by parliament, and open to public scrutiny, the risk that they will be bad for ordinary people on both sides of those deals is high. At the moment, the government only has nice words about democratic accountability. Unless this gets translated into policies, the question you need to ask is: can you trust Liam Fox with the NHS, with food regulation and with workers’ rights?”

Background

The Trade Justice Movement, its member organisations, leading trade unions and other groups are campaigning for trade democracy. We consider that the best way to achieve trade deals that work for the benefit of all, is to ensure trade policy is supported by clear democratic procedures and meaningful Parliamentary sovereignty.

The campaign is asking for five changes, which would make future UK trade deals more democratic and accountable:

- The right of Parliament to set a thorough mandate to govern each trade negotiation, with a remit for the devolved administrations
- The right of the public to be consulted as part of setting that mandate
- Full transparency in negotiations
- The right of Parliament to amend and to reject trade deals, with full debates and scrutiny guaranteed and a remit for the devolved administrations
- The right of Parliament to review trade deals and withdraw from them in a timely manner

These five asks form the basis of Early Day Motion 128 in parliament, which is currently supported by 90 MPs.

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