HOUSE OF COMMONS

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: UK trade policy: food and agriculture , HC 162

Tuesday 23 April 2024

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Sir Robert Goodwill (Chair); Barry Gardiner; Dr Neil Hudson; Mrs Sheryll Murray; Selaine Saxby; Derek Thomas.

Business and Trade Committee Member also present: Anthony Mangnall.

Questions 265 – 353

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Greg Hands MP, Minister for Trade Policy, Department for Business and Trade; Deborah Morrison, Deputy Director, Tariffs, Rules of Origin, International Food Security and Negotiations Strategy, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; Rt Hon Sir Mark Spencer MP, Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– DEFRA

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Greg Hands, Deborah Morrison and Sir Mark Spencer.

Q265 **Chair:** Welcome to this session of the EFRA Select Committee, in which we are pursuing our investigation into UK trade policy and its impacts on food and agriculture. We are very pleased to welcome Anthony Mangnall from the Business and Trade Committee, bringing his expertise and insight.

Anthony Mangnall: That is very generous.

Chair: I am also very pleased to welcome two Ministers and Deborah Morrison, who was my private secretary when I was Immigration Minister. Deborah is well known to me and is formidable, as I recall.

This is probably the first occasion we have had to congratulate Sir Mark Spencer on his knighthood. It is very well deserved.

If you introduce yourselves very briefly for the record, starting with Minister Hands, we will then get on with the questions.

Greg Hands: I am Greg Hands, Minister of State for Trade Policy at the Department for Business and Trade.

Sir Mark Spencer: I am Mark Spencer, Food, Farming and Fisheries Minister at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Deborah Morrison: Thank you, Sir Robert. It was a privilege to work for you at the Home Office. I am Deborah Morrison, deputy director for tariffs, rules of origin and negotiation strategy at Defra.

Q266 **Chair:** Welcome all. We will start with Sir Mark. In the evidence that we have heard already in this inquiry concerns have been raised repeatedly that the UK does not have a coherent trade strategy for food and agriculture, partly fuelled by the fact that very early on the Government were very keen to get the Australia and New Zealand deals over the line. They could be accused of having made it up as they went along to get those deals over the line to demonstrate that we could negotiate deals. Is there a coherent strategy or is it very much done on a country-by-country basis?

Sir Mark Spencer: That is a bit unfair, to be honest. We could be accused of not being as public about it as we could have been, but we have a strategy. Clearly, we want to make sure we exploit as many opportunities for UK plc, for UK farmers and producers, around the world as possible. We also want to make sure we secure our own food security through trade deals. As a free-trading nation, we want to co-operate and work with our partners around the world to make sure food supplies flow in both directions as freely as possible. We can demonstrate that by the work we are doing to introduce food attachés around the world in order to build those links and those relationships.

We have a strategy, but what we will never do is write a document out that says, "This is what we want to achieve. This is where we want to end up." In those circumstances, if you are not careful when you try to do a free trade deal with another country, you will disadvantage yourself by setting out what you want to achieve before you get into those negotiations.

Q267 **Chair:** It is like playing a game of poker with your hand open to the opposition.

Sir Mark Spencer: That would be a mistake, would it not? The broad thrust is to gain as many opportunities for UK food and drink exporters as is physically possible while making sure, as a free-trading nation, that trade flows both ways and that therefore we are food secure as a nation. We want to get the balance right between what we can produce here and what we want to operate in terms of importing other quality foods from around the world.

Q268 **Chair:** Turning to you, Greg, because we have not published even a broad-brush trade strategy, many stakeholders are worried about some of the animal welfare, environmental and other concerns. Although you have made it clear that there is a red line on chlorine-washed chicken and hormone-treated beef, which always gets in the newspapers, are there other red lines that it might be helpful to publish as part of a strategy, to reassure those who think we might be engaged in a race to the bottom in terms of standards? I am thinking about things like palm oil, for example, which people are concerned about.

Greg Hands: Thank you for the invitation to appear with you today. I agree 100% with Minister Spencer and his approach. It is clear what the UK trade strategy is. In Government, you do not always have to publish a 500-page blockbuster document. The Prime Minister's open letter to British farmers in May last year shows where the Prime Minister wants us to take agrifood trade.

As a Department, we publish an export strategy, which does not look at specific trade negotiations or what we are seeking to get out of trade negotiations. It talks in a much more immediate sense about what we are trying to get for UK exporters, and for UK food and drink and agrifood exporters within that. That is the right place for the strategy to be rather than a trade negotiation strategy.

What are we looking to do conceptually? What does the UK do well? What are we looking to sell more of? What are we looking to export more of? Where do Government provide that support for exporters rather than setting out a negotiation strategy?

If I might add, before each FTA negotiation we set out in what is called the bundle what our objectives are for that negotiation. Again, those are very high level. It would not be in our interest to say, "We are seeking a TRQ of X millions of tonnes of this, that or the other" in the broad-brush approach on the trade negotiation strategy. When we do an FTA, we set out clearly what the negotiation objectives will be for that individual negotiation.

Chair: Barry wants to butt in briefly.

Q269 **Barry Gardiner:** I understand what you have said, Minister, and indeed what the Chair himself said about not revealing one's hand. Would you agree that, in countries like the United States, where they have a mandate that sets out very clearly what the negotiators are going to do and indeed are required to do by Congress, that can be extremely helpful to them in their negotiations? When a request comes in from the other side, they can simply say, "Sorry, we can't do that. It is not in our mandate. Our mandate is specifically against that."

Greg Hands: You raise an interesting point, Mr Gardiner, but I might counter that by saying that every country and party in the world of international trade approaches things slightly differently. They have a slightly different setup. The US Trade Representative, being its own executive office, has a very different setup from us. We have a full UK Government Department, the Department for Business and Trade. With the role that Congress plays in things like international agreements, inevitably you have to have a different set of operating rules.

One thing that I might draw attention to is that the UK has in recent times had good success negotiating free trade agreements. We have free trade agreements with more than 70 counterparts plus the European Union. That record speaks for itself on the overall approach that we take structurally, in terms of where we publish the policies and how we approach each negotiation.

Q270 **Chair:** Although you have not published the strategy and you do not initially lay out your negotiating position, which as Barry pointed out happens in other countries, precedents have been set by other deals like the ones with Australia and New Zealand. Are we lowering the bar a little bit with some of the generous TRQs that were given in those situations?

Concerns have been expressed by farmers that that might undermine some of the markets here. In some ways, does that send a clear message to other countries with which we are negotiating that they do not need to play hardball? If they were to get the same sort of deal that New Zealand and Australia got, that would be quite a good deal for them, particularly the big agricultural exporting countries.

Greg Hands: It depends, Sir Robert, on how one looks at the Australia free trade agreement. Do not forget that Australia gave us tariff-free access across the board from day one, whereas for the particular products we are talking about there is staged access over a period of 12 or 15 years.

You can use the precedent setting in different directions. The beneficial access that we got for Scotch whisky, for example, is not something that is available to European spirits manufacturers because Europe has not concluded a free trade agreement with Australia. The precedent-setting can work both ways.

When one country looks at doing a free trade agreement with another, it will look at what the precedents are. It is still ultimately down to the negotiation. It does not necessarily weaken or strengthen your negotiating hand because every negotiation is different. You have a different series of offensive and defensive asks with each counterpart, depending on what they produce, what tariffs they have to start with and what their other trading arrangements are. It need not impinge on the unique nature of each free trade agreement negotiation.

Sir Mark Spencer: If that were true, in CPTPP, for example, you would have seen a much larger availability of quotas for beef and pork, which we did not see. We were able to negotiate a much better deal in CPTPP for those sectors. We were able to protect those sectors from huge amounts of import while securing great advantage in terms of exports.

Q271 **Chair:** We have two Ministers from two different Departments. Which of you is responsible for advocating for international trade in agricultural commodities? Is it a shared responsibility? Is there a Minister who has this in their job description and who has sole responsibility for promoting exports overseas? We have Foreign Office involvement in some cases.

Sir Mark Spencer: I am the Minister responsible within Defra. We have regular conversations with our friends in DBT to make sure we agree the strategy, the mandates, what they can offer and what they cannot offer. If they want to step outside of that mandate, they come back to us and have a further conversation. We are very conscious that we are a part of those negotiations, but there has to be one Department in control of the overall strategy of any trade deal.

Chair: We will probably go into that in more detail later on.

Greg Hands: Ultimately, it is a co-operative exercise. It is worth remembering that Defra is not the only stakeholder in a free trade agreement negotiation. Using the example of Australia, DCMS and DSIT were involved in terms of digital trade, telecoms rules and financial services. We have to work together as one Government. It just does not work if we go in without properly squaring something off with one of the Departments.

It is worth remembering that a free trade agreement by definition, to qualify with the WTO, has to cover the majority of trade. Therefore, inevitably, it will involve multiple Government Departments. As the lead negotiator, it is our job, as Minister Spencer says, to agree the mandate and make sure we fully understand some of the trade-offs that may result. Ultimately, in almost all cases, these negotiations will involve a multiplicity of Government Departments.

Sir Mark Spencer: It is also worth pointing out that in Deborah's team there is an enormous amount of expertise in shaping those mandates and working out strategy. I am only able to do my job with the support of that brilliant team.

Q272 **Chair:** We have had some unprecedented shocks to global trade in all sorts of commodities, particularly agricultural commodities, with the invasion of Ukraine, problems in the Red Sea, China's sabre rattling in the South China Sea and other global issues. What lessons have the Government learned from those shocks? How has that informed the attitudes and approaches to global trade and to global trade agreements?

Sir Mark Spencer: Again, those have reaffirmed the necessity to be a free-trading nation, to build as many networks of trade as possible around the world so we can make the most of marketplaces elsewhere, and to try to insulate ourselves from those global shocks by working with friends and neighbours around the world, and to not be afraid to call on those relationships in those moments of crisis.

That is the right strategy. That is the right way to go forward. It demonstrates how important food security is, and that if we put all our eggs in the basket of domestic production, we could be exposed.

Chair: I hope they are free range, by the way.

Sir Mark Spencer: Yes, quite. We could be exposed to a disease or weather event if we did not have those relationships of trade. If you put all your eggs in the trade basket, clearly, global events can affect you in that way. The right thing to do is to get that balance right between domestic production and free-trading arrangements with friends and neighbours around the world.

Greg Hands: Minister Spencer is absolutely correct. It is a question of diversifying your counterparts and your potential sources. That is why we have done the number of free trade agreements that we have done. Joining CPTPP adds to that diversity.

We also engage very strongly at the World Trade Organization on these issues. It is not just a UK thing. We are making sure the UK takes advantage of its newfound independence at the WTO to be assertive in the space of free trade and rules-based fair trade globally. That is why we push very strongly to make sure the world trade system continues to operate as well as it does.

Q273 **Chair:** The UK has just moved up the league table to be the fourth biggest exporter. I am surprised that has not been mentioned already by our witnesses. To what extent are agricultural exports part of that situation? Is it a drop in the ocean? Is it in a lower league than financial services, motor cars and all those other things that we export?

Greg Hands: The agrifood export side is a really important part of that. As has been the case for many decades now, services exports remains the biggest area of growth for the UK. We are the world's second largest services exporter and 80% of our economy is services. That does not need to come at the expense of goods exports at all.

We do a very good job, Minister Spencer's Department in particular, of promoting our agrifood export capability. We have a lot of people in place around the world doing exactly that.

Sir Mark Spencer: It is a very important part of our economy that is often overlooked. A lot of jobs are reliant upon the food and drink sector and the processing sector. It is a huge part of the economy. It also presents a huge opportunity for the UK to go and sell our brilliant products around the world. We have some really strong brands, not least of all Scotch whisky. Salmon is also a huge export market. Mr Kipling, for example, is a very strong brand, which would not be recognised as being UK-only because that product is sold all over the world, as far as Australia.

Q274 **Chair:** The point that I was working up to is this. Given that agricultural exports are a small part of our overall export market, is there a danger that they could be traded off in the negotiations or, as some suggest, sold down the river because of the low-hanging fruit that is so much more important?

Greg Hands: I definitely refute that, Sir Robert. I can promise you that the stakeholders we engage with the most are often in the food and drink sector. If you were to say to an organisation like the Scotch Whisky Association that the UK Government do not pay sufficient attention to them, they would dispute that. It is a really strong part of our offer and our offensives. As seen in the current negotiations with the Gulf and India, it is a big part of our offensive approach when it comes to getting market access.

Q275 **Chair:** India is our second biggest market for Scotch whisky after France.

Deborah Morrison: Yes, that is right.

Greg Hands: It has very high tariffs of up to 150%.

Chair: Nobody believes that France is our biggest whisky export market, but there you go.

Q276 **Mrs Murray:** This question is for both of you, but I will start with you, Minister Spencer. How are Defra and DBT working together to promote and protect UK agrifood and consider the trade-offs between agriculture and other sectors? I am thinking perhaps about the trade-off with the automotive sector, for instance.

Sir Mark Spencer: I see that as being a fundamental part of my job. It starts with the process of me sitting down with Deborah's team of civil servants and working out, as we enter into the start of any trade deal, what we would like to achieve and what we are willing to give away to achieve those ambitions. We will then sit down with the DBT team and explain those ambitions, what we would like to achieve and what we are willing to give away.

It is quite important that we have those conversations privately behind the scenes, so that we both understand where we are coming from and understand the limits of where we will go to. We then unleash the brilliant negotiators to go and achieve the best deal that they can.

Greg Hands: I agree with that. First of all, there are very cordial relations between Government Departments, particularly in recent times. I would also add that we follow a proper true governmental process, using write-rounds and agreeing a mandate. That is the best way to approach this. There should not be any surprises.

In the heat of a negotiation, we sometimes have to move quite quickly. In my experience, having probably overseen more free trade agreement negotiations than anybody else, I have seen Defra moving quite quickly and in quite a co-operative way. We all do that when it gets to the business end of a negotiation, which is when you are accelerating. Each round might take a week, and then suddenly you are pitched into a tunnel when you are getting there. That can put quite a lot of stress on the whole organisation, but we do well in that space.

Q277 **Mrs Murray:** What impact has the dissolution of the Department for International Trade had on cross-Government co-ordination on trade policy? What mitigating structures have you put in place?

Greg Hands: That is a very good question, Mrs Murray. As somebody who has served three times in this role at the Department for International Trade and now once at the Department for Business and Trade, I might be best placed to answer that.

Without sounding too nostalgic about it, DIT was a very lean machine that was very much dedicated to trade negotiations. The merger with BEIS, for which I also served as Minister for a year, has big advantages. You understand a lot of your sectors—they are literally in the same room. Particularly when it comes to industrial sectors, they are in another part of the same Department. On business, we do outreach to business on a continuous basis. That can obviously include the overlap with agriculture business, agrifood and so on. The merger of the Departments comes with big advantages.

It has not materially impacted our relationship with other Departments, which is the heart of your question. We interact most significantly probably with Defra, but we also interact with DSIT when it comes to digital trade, HMT when it comes to financial services, and DfE and DfT when anything specifically about education or transport is involved. It has not had any noticeable impact on our interaction with Government Departments.

Sir Mark Spencer: It is a badge on the door. At the end of the day, it is about the people involved. We have the same relationships and the same operating model. Deborah, you have worked under both. Have you noticed any difference?

Deborah Morrison: No. As Minister Hands says, it has been very seamless from the perspective of the Government Departments that work with DBT. We work very closely with our colleagues. I speak to Minister Hands' officials on a daily basis. It has been helpful. In goods, where I work, for example, we can get the whole picture across agrifood goods and manufactured goods as one collective team in the negotiations.

Q278 **Mrs Murray:** Minister Spencer, I have one for you now. How are the significant changes in domestic agricultural policy reflected in the Government's approach to international agrifood trade?

Sir Mark Spencer: Again, it presents us with a real opportunity. Moving away from the old EU subsidies regime and into the sustainable farming incentive presents us with a huge opportunity to say to the rest of the world, "Look at what we can achieve here in the UK. Look at how we are producing some of the greatest food anywhere in the world. We are doing that with a smaller environmental footprint and improving biodiversity at the same time."

That is something that consumers around the world want to embrace. It is a real advantage to us in selling our goods to other parts of the world. We are not shy about exploiting that opportunity. Our welfare standards are very high, and that is what consumers want to see. Our standards regime in terms of pesticide use is one of the tightest anywhere in the world. When people are buying British food, they know it is of the highest quality, produced to the highest welfare standards and in a way that is the safest in the world.

Q279 **Mrs Murray:** Is there is an opportunity for greater integration of domestic policy decisions in trade objectives?

Sir Mark Spencer: I think so. Along with that comes the soft power to lead the world in the right way. You mentioned palm oil. In the CPTPP negotiations and deal, we were able to give the Malaysians a nudge in the right direction to make sure they are thinking about combating deforestation. That is very important to UK consumers, but it is also important from a global perspective. Without being all pious about it, we can give the world a nudge in the right direction and demonstrate that these things can be done with a smaller environmental footprint.

Q280 **Mrs Murray:** Finally from me, we have heard that the strategic agrifood objectives of Scotland and Wales are not adequately reflected in UK trade policy. How are you ensuring that the devolved Administrations can meaningfully contribute to trade policy decisions?

Sir Mark Spencer: Yes, we work closely with the devolved Administrations. We do not agree on everything. We occasionally disagree on things, but we do have regular conversations. I mentioned Scottish whisky earlier, which is obviously very important to Scotland. We work very closely with the Scottish Government to make sure we are going into bat as robustly as we can on behalf of that sector.

Greg Hands: I would add to that, Mrs Murray. Although I am noticing that there is not a member of the Committee from one of the devolved nations—there is an SNP member who is not here—I cannot tell you how many Interministerial Group for Trade meetings with the three devolved Administrations I have run over the years. Those are held quarterly. our officials work very well together. We make sure that the devolved Administrations are involved, asked about their objectives in the negotiation and briefed. That has worked extremely well, particularly over the last three years since we have been negotiating free trade agreements.

We meet on a quarterly basis, as I said. At the last meeting last week, we met with the new Northern Ireland Minister and the Welsh Minister; the Scottish Minister could not make it, but he sent an official. That works pretty well.

Q281 **Chair:** On the back of that question, there seems to be a bit of a perfect storm brewing up in terms of vegetable oil and oilseed supplies with the problems with olive oil production in southern Europe, the disruption to sunflower production in Ukraine and oilseed rape, which many predict might even disappear from our fields in the next two or three years. We are already down about 60%. Is there a strategy in terms of making sure we do have adequate supplies of vegetable oils? Would that unfortunately be on the back of more palm oil being imported?

Sir Mark Spencer: We do consider these things. We consistently model and record what is happening in terms of plantings of different crops. This year is quite unusual. As you identified, there was that perfect storm brewing, given the weather patterns we have seen and the inability of farmers to plant winter crops, which has seen quite a reduction in terms of winter wheat and oilseed rape last autumn.

Chair: I think most got their rape in in July, before the storm really broke. It was the cabbage stem flea beetle that caused problems.

Sir Mark Spencer: It is something that we will continue to monitor. There is also pressure on yields of olive oil within Europe. It is something that we are alive to and something that we will continue to monitor.

Q282 **Barry Gardiner:** Minister, I was very interested to hear what you said about the very close co-operative working with the devolved Administrations and how you felt that was working well. The evidence that we received from the Scottish Government, I am afraid, does not necessarily back that up. They were of the view that Scotland did not support the UK’s decision to phase out tariffs on lamb and beef in the FTAs. They wanted a differentiation of cuts of meat in the interim TRQs to shelter UK prime cuts from competition.

Indeed, when this Committee was looking at the Australia agreement we noted that there was a vulnerability there because we had concluded the negotiations on a tonnage basis, a weight basis, rather than on a cuts basis. That is really significant, particularly to those farmers. They were quite explicit in saying that they did not feel the UK Government's approach aligned with its priorities. How do you respond to that criticism?

Sir Mark Spencer: I think I was clear. I said we do not agree on everything, but we have conversations with them on a regular basis. We agree on quite a lot.

Q283 **Barry Gardiner:** You have cited Scotch whisky, which is by far our largest—it is £6.2 billion or something like that. When you get down to the nitty-gritty of things like cuts of beef, it really has a huge impact. As you know well, Minister Spencer, when you are dealing with upland hill farmers or sheep farmers, those margins can be critical to the preservation of their livelihoods.

Sir Mark Spencer: Yes. It is something that we bear in mind when we are doing those trade negotiations. As a really good example of that, under CPTPP, we were able to do a deal with Mexico to export pork offal to the Mexicans. It is not something that we eat here in the UK very much, but it brings carcass balance to the UK pork sector. Getting the balance right, as you indicate, between which parts of the animal we consume here and which parts we can export to other parts of the world is a really good opportunity for those trade deals. It is something that we have pushed quite hard on, and we have had some success.

It is the same for chicken. We tend to eat breast meat in the UK. Other parts of the chicken we can export to friends and neighbours around the world where they eat different parts of the bird.

Barry Gardiner: I will come on to Mexico and pork meat in due course, but I will leave it there.

Greg Hands: If I can add to that, we work very well together. I mentioned the Interministerial Group for Trade, which I chair every quarter. We have official groups in both DBT and Defra. Defra's Devolved Administrations Trade Engagement Group meets every six weeks. The senior officials at DBT engage on a very regular basis.

Mr Gardiner will be well aware of this, but on a political leve, it is worth remembering that the Scottish National Party has never supported any trade deal with anybody ever. It has always voted against any EU trade deal, let alone any UK trade deal. When examining the Scottish Government's criticism of the process, one has to recognise that the political oversight of that is not a set of people who are favourable to UK trade deals. Having said that, we work well on a co-operative basis, on an official level and in the briefings that we provide.

You also need to look at the end point. The SNP, at least here in Westminster and previously in the European Parliament, votes against every single trade deal. It has never supported a single trade deal ever negotiated by the EU or the Commission.

Chair: That is despite the fact that Scotch whisky and salmon are the two big beneficiaries of any deal.

Greg Hands: Yes, absolutely.

Q284 **Derek Thomas:** Minister Hands, why did we decide to replace the trade advisory groups with the much more sexily titled updated stakeholder management structure? Can you talk through a bit of the thinking around that and how that has helped or helps?

Greg Hands: In terms of industry engagement—we do a huge amount of industry engagement—I always say to people that in the world of trade policy you can get lost in the esoteric world of technical barriers to trade chapters and rules of origin, and negotiating these 1,000-page blockbuster documents, but there is no point doing trade deals unless they benefit businesses, specifically exporters and consumers. That is where you are trying to bring the benefit. To do that, you have to understand the impact on that sector, both the advantages to that sector and the defensives that the sector is facing.

We run a number of policy insight forums. We engage with industry, including the whole agriculture and agrifood sector, on a regular basis. The exact structure has changed over the years. You will find some people who preferred the previous structure and some people who prefer the current structure. If people feel that the structure can work better, we are always open to looking at it.

Q285 **Derek Thomas:** Is the new structure more effective at engaging the agrifood sector?

Greg Hands: That is perhaps a question better put to them. I feel like we have a good relationship, and it goes right from the top of Government. The Prime Minister has an excellent relationship with the NFU. That is reflected across Defra and DBT. We engage on a very regular basis with the sector. Defra leads on the sector, but we are all quite happy that DBT engages with the sector directly as well, as we do with other sectors. It is important for us to understand, co-operatively across Government, the needs and desires of the sector.

Q286 **Derek Thomas:** We are led to believe that Australia and the USA have a more integrated approach, where people in the industry and the sector are much more closely aligned or engaged in the process of negotiating FTAs. Is that fair? Could we follow some of the examples of these countries?

Greg Hands: To be honest, Mr Thomas, we are always keen to look across and see what other countries do. That is one of the nice advantages of being in the world of international trade. When you sit down with your opposite number, it is important for you to understand the structure of their system because it helps you to understand where they are coming from. If they say that something a really important issue for their stakeholders or for their Congress, Parliament or Assembly, whatever it is, you need to understand that.

I do not know whether the UK is in a worse position on this. We have a coherent approach. We have negotiated really well over the last few years. The mere fact that we have the free trade agreements with more than 70 countries, plus the EU and plus CPTPP, shows that we are more than capable of holding our own and prospering in the world of international negotiations.

Sir Mark Spencer: Maybe we are being a little bit British about this, but the fact we do not shout about it does not mean it is not happening. As a Minister, I have sat down with lots of those different sectors and had those conversations in terms of, "Look, we want to try to achieve this on cheese with Dairy UK, but there may be a price to pay on eggs. Where do we want to pitch ourselves? What are we willing to trade?"

That is an open conversation around my office desk, working with the NFU and different sectors to explain the challenges that we are facing, the asks that have been made of us and what we want to try to achieve. Working with those sectors privately behind closed doors and deciding what our mandate is going to be is the right way to do it.

We then work with Deborah's team and feed that into DBT, and DBT goes and negotiates it. Trying to take people on that journey is the right way to do it, but we do that quietly, without shouting about it from the rooftops.

Q287 **Derek Thomas:** Can we go one step further? When you have a trade negotiation delegation, do you have business and trade representative groups on that delegation? Do you take people with you when you are doing these negotiations?

Greg Hands: Very often we take business delegations with us on trade missions, on trade visits. We do not typically take business delegations into or just outside of the negotiation room. The onus is on us to understand their needs and desires, and to work out where compromises might be needed.

Having business delegations in the room with you is something that might make the process of negotiation more difficult. When we get to the business end of a negotiation, we very frequently get sectors in and work out, "This is what counterpart X is proposing. What would the impact of proposal X be for you? If X is not acceptable, would X minus a bit, X plus a bit or a slightly different version of X be more acceptable?" I have had quite a few of those conversations.

Sir Mark Spencer: It could be exploited against you. If you are faced in that negotiation and someone says, "We want this ask of Scottish whisky," and you say, "I cannot commit to that at the moment. I am going to have to go away and think about it," they will say, "He is sat right behind you. Why can't you just ask him now?"

It gives you the ability to say, in slower time, "I just need to think that through. I have stakeholders who I need to go and sell that to. Give me a moment to go and reflect with my team." Slowing those things down at that moment can often be an advantage in that negotiation.

Q288 **Derek Thomas:** Minister Hands, so far you have been very complimentary about Minister Spencer, almost in every question. Are you in full agreement with him about being less British and needing to advertise more how closely business and trade are engaged in the discussion?

The problem is that Government are constantly criticised for not having people around the table enough. We are hearing that they are there, but we are just not talking about it enough.

Greg Hands: In my experience, lobbying groups would not be lobbying groups if they were ever 100% satisfied with everything, Mr Thomas. You cease to be a lobbying group if you say, "We are 100% satisfied with everything there is across all Government Departments." Of course they will ask for more. That is completely natural. The UK works well with business representative organisations as well as individual businesses. We reach out to them and we do a pretty good job of understanding their needs and some of their defensives.

Q289 **Chair:** Following on from that, one of the problems is about the perception of farmers in particular. They do not hear the good news about exports, but they hear a lot about the concerns. Particularly if there is an election for president of the NFU or something like that going on, a lot of people will be talking about the negatives. Should we be a little bit more on the front foot in saying, "Look at the fantastic exports that we are achieving"? British lamb has always been a fantastic success story in the continental market, but most people do not seem to know about it.

Sir Mark Spencer: Yes. British lamb to the US is another achievement that is not always widely recognised, like offal to Mexico and the ability to trade with lots of those partners. There have been some huge successes, but we live in a world where bad news sells more newspapers than good news.

We do our best. We do our bit. We try to stick out those press releases and celebrate those wins. You might not know, but this week is British beef week. I have been out this morning promoting top-quality British beef. We can all do a bit more. I know this Committee also celebrates and supports great British produce. We all have a responsibility, as stakeholders, the Department and Government, to big up and celebrate all we do as UK food producers.

Chair: Every week is British beef week in the Goodwill household.

Sir Mark Spencer: There we go.

Q290 **Dr Hudson:** Thank you, Ministers, for being before us today. Given that it is British beef week, I hope you had a steak sandwich for breakfast, Minister Spencer. I want to go on to impact assessments and trading information. Currently, the Government produce impact assessments for each individual trade deal in the negotiation stage and consider the effects of agreements across many different sectors of the economy. Agrifood is represented in a number of categories.

Witnesses to our inquiry have requested that the actual cumulative impact of combined trade deals is looked at in more detail. I know you are looking at things on an individual basis, but how do you respond to that request to see what the cumulative impact of some of these different trade deals is?

Sir Mark Spencer: First, the Prime Minister is committed to that food security index. That is going to be a really good indicator to identify where we are in terms of UK food security. A number of vectors will be considered in that indicator. That is a big step forward to make sure that we, as a country, can analyse where we are and the direction of travel.

We continue to monitor the impact of those trade deals, both cumulative and individually. There are positives and negatives in all of those things. Our job is to try to strike that balance between what is positive and what is negative and to improve the positives. That is what we are trying to do.

Q291 **Dr Hudson:** The food security index is something that the Committee very much welcomes. We asked for it on an annual basis to have a snapshot of where the UK is on food security. You are saying that the cumulative effects of some of these trade deals will be looked at in the food security index. Will you publish that as a separate piece of work or is it done on a bespoke case-by-case basis for each individual trade deal?

Sir Mark Spencer: We do it collectively. It is quite difficult to extrapolate the impact of an individual trade deal. You can set a quota for a product to be imported into the UK. That does not necessarily mean that quota will be fulfilled. There are a number of examples in the Australia and New Zealand trade deals where we have allowed imports of certain products and we have not seen anywhere near that volume of product come to the UK.

Another example would be CPTPP. There was some criticism about egg imports coming from Mexico, which we have allowed in that trade deal. Mexico has not exported an egg anywhere; it is a net importer of eggs. While you could add up those numbers and extrapolate that that is going to have an impact on the British egg industry, the facts are very different from that. No eggs will be coming as part of that trade deal because that is not how the market has responded.

Q292 **Dr Hudson:** If I could pivot over to you, Minister Hands, I want to ask about the methodology in terms of impact assessments. In 2022, the trade modelling review expert panel chaired by Professor Tony Venables recommended additional approaches that could improve the sensitivity and usability of the impact assessment methodology. Has your Department looked at those recommendations? Is there any plan to adopt any of Professor Venables' recommendations?

Greg Hands: It is a really good question, Dr Hudson. Frankly, DIT previously and DBT now were not entirely satisfied with some of the conventional modelling on free trade agreements. We think it is traditionally very gravity-based and proximity-based. When you look at the free trade agreements in more recent history, it is too early to assess them. The UK free trade agreements with Australia and New Zealand only entered into force in May of last year. Traditionally, they underestimate the benefit that a free trade agreement has made and the increase in trade that can occur. This is something that we keep a lookout for all the time.

If I might just return to the first question that you posed to Minister Spencer, it is always worth remembering that free trade agreements are only part of the picture. A huge amount of trade takes place outside of a particular free trade agreement. That might be trade under WTO rules or trade using the UK global tariff, which is unadjusted for any free trade agreement. It might be trade that takes place using a WTO quota rather than a quota that is in the FTA.

Even if one can see the accumulated impacts, it can often be difficult to dissect which impact is down to which quota or which tariff change, in addition to the read-across between different FTAs.

Take rice, for example. This country is not a primary producer of rice. When I negotiated the UK-Vietnam free trade agreement, we negotiated a slightly larger increase in quota on Vietnamese rice. We needed to do that to get the deal across the line. It is not displacing UK production, but if there is an increase in the import of Vietnamese rice, who is that likely to be at the expense of? We might do some modelling on that. Again, that might read across. These are quite complex areas to identify that a specific change in a specific FTA has led to the specific increase in that product being imported.

Q293 **Dr Hudson:** That is very helpful. You have both mentioned today that a trade agreement is a two-way process. There are benefits to UK producers in terms of the export market and, equally, we can potentially fill in gaps that we do not produce here.

To both of you, how effectively are the Government identifying the potential export opportunities for our fantastic UK agrifood sector? You have talked about the food attachés; there is cross-Government working, and we have had things like the annual UK Farm to Fork Summit at Downing Street. How effective are we in identifying the opportunities and then banging the drum for our fantastic UK producers?

Sir Mark Spencer: There is always more we can do, but we have made huge strides over the last few years. Some of those attachés have been in place for two-plus years. We are starting to see the benefit of those relationships now.

Q294 **Dr Hudson:** Can you articulate the benefits that you are seeing from them?

Sir Mark Spencer: Some of them are about understanding the challenges within the country. Some of this is cultural; if you do not understand those cultural challenges, you can never open the door. Lots of it is about relationships and making sure you are putting yourself in the right place to sell that product. For example, tomorrow we have a huge team in Barcelona at a fish fair—the largest fish expo in the world. We have a huge team out there selling Scottish and UK fish to the world and building up those trade contacts to make sure we can put fish buyers and fish sellers in the same place to shake hands and sell UK fish.

Q295 **Dr Hudson:** You are comfortable—we keep coming back to this; it is a recurrent theme—that the cross-Government working works well with the Foreign Office, the Trade Department and Defra to say, "Look, these are the opportunities." Are we all in the same room talking about the same issues?

Sir Mark Spencer: If you accept that you are brilliant, you have stopped striving to be better, have you not? We are not in that place. We are always looking to improve our performance and find more and better ways to sell more products. We are not complacent, but we do acknowledge that we have made some significant progress.

Q296 **Dr Hudson:** I will pivot over to you, Minister Hands, to focus on something that this inquiry has highlighted as an area where we are perhaps not so brilliant, which is the potentially fragmented nature of import and export information.

Stakeholders and specialists have said that they really would appreciate a more simplified single trade information portal to lubricate access to markets in and out. Does that resonate with you? Do you think, "Yes, we agree with that and we can help lubricate the process for our producers and businesses"?

Greg Hands: It is essential. For exporters, the ease of access to information is crucial. That is why we have GREAT.gov.uk, which is the place where all exporters and businesses are referred to. That is where all the information is collected together as a portal. The first place to go for anybody who is looking to become an exporter is GREAT.gov.uk. It may lead you through to one of our DBT international trade advisers or one of the Defra agrifood people in post around the world.

The UK has one of the best commercial diplomacy networks around the world. That is a huge resource. There is an ability to access people. We have people in 11 different places in the United States, for example—we have somebody in Denver, for example. Not every medium-sized or large country has that ability and that global reach around the world to be able to line you up with an importer. On top of that, we have the Prime Minister's trade envoys. They are also very much schooled in promoting agrifood exports. We have quite a lot of resources to bring to the table across three Departments: FCDO, DBT and Defra.

Q297 **Dr Hudson:** That is really helpful. In the quest to always improve those resources, does your Department keep a watching brief on that portal, the number of businesses accessing it and any feedback they are giving on potential issues that they are having in getting into the various networks? Are you able to feed back in a two-way way and help businesses use this fantastic resource even better?

Greg Hands: It has had a refresh recently, as you would expect, based on experience. If I might comment on one of your earlier questions, Dr Hudson, there is something in us promoting the benefits and the opportunities for trade in agrifood. I do not want to rehash the past, but almost as an inevitable consequence of doing the Australia and New Zealand FTAs first, there was a focus on defensives on agriculture, to be frank. Quite often, the Government got into a discussion that was quite defensive-oriented. We are now looking at some of the opportunities.

On CPTPP, I remember talking to agriculture exporters and farmers from Australia and New Zealand. One of the defensives that I had was that most Australian beef and lamb exporters were exporting into fast-growing Asian markets. I cannot remember what the figures were, but 80% or 90% of their exports were going into Asia-Pacific markets. One of the things about CPTPP is that that gives us the chance to have a bit of the action and to export into those same fast-growing markets, so countries like Vietnam. CPTPP will grow as well.

As for India, there are some defensives in India, but there are also huge opportunities for UK agrifood to sell into that market of 1.4 billion people. The Gulf is a region that is not a big agrifood producer, but it has a big appetite for UK agrifood goods.

We are now seeing some really strong opportunities for the UK in some of the more recent negotiations. Those will give a much more positive picture of the trade opportunities that are there for UK agriculture.

Q298 **Chair:** It is interesting that you mention rice, Minister Hands. Although we do not produce rice here, it is a commodity that has very high tariffs. Places like Japan have very high import tariffs. We do have an interest in milling rice because of the tariff differential between brown rice with the brown attached and white rice. That is the only reason why we have a rice-milling industry in London.

Is that industry right to be worried about a trade deal with India? If we lift those tariffs or change that tariff situation, why would they not mill the rice where it is produced rather than bringing it here and doing it here?

Greg Hands: We are very aware of this. Certainly, DBT and Defra are very aware of the UK industry. I cannot really comment on a live trade negotiation, but that is something that we are aware of.

The other key stake on something like rice will be that, although we are not a primary producer, quite often we import rice from developing countries. If we do offer a bigger quota to a developed country, we have to think about whether that importation might come at the expense of one of our developing world partners.

There is also a bit of foreign policy and a bit of development policy involved in some of these questions. We offer tariff-free access to many rice producers around the world who sell their rice into the UK. It is important for us to be able to import that rice. If we were to take more rice from a developed market, it could come at the expense of that developing market.

There are a number of issues. As you know, Sir Robert, quite often people will write to you asking, "Why do we not just let in everything that the UK does not produce?" Rice or olive oil would perhaps be good examples. The answer is that it is more complicated than that because of some of the trade preferences that we have for developing countries and the fact that sometimes there is a UK industry built around that good, in terms of not just the primary importation but what happens to that good when it arrives in the UK.

Chair: We now bring in our guest, Anthony Mangnall.

Q299 **Anthony Mangnall:** Do you have the trade figures for what we have exported to Australia since the trade agreement came in, specifically the figures on beef?

Greg Hands: Yes. Hold on a second, Mr Mangnall. I am looking at beef in 2023. Bear in mind that the trade deals with Australia and New Zealand only entered into force less than a year ago. Over the past year, New Zealand used 20% of its quota for beef, 1.4 kilotons of the 7.1 kiloton quota, and Australia used 8% of its quota, 1.7 kilotons of its 20.6 kiloton quota. That is for 2023. On sheep meat, New Zealand did not use any of its quota under the FTA and Australia used 3 kilotons, which is 20% of its 14.7 kiloton sheep meat quota.

Q300 **Anthony Mangnall:** What was Australia's beef export to the UK?

Greg Hands: Last year, it was 1.7 kilotons of its 20.6 kiloton quota.

Q301 **Anthony Mangnall:** Forgive me, but the reason I am asking is that the perception of the way in which the Australia trade agreement was conducted was that farmers lost out in favour of services. In his opening statement, the Minister made a point about saying that it was fantastic because we had open access to their markets from day one.

The challenge that a lot of people see across this country is whether our farmers can scale up to realise the opportunities from entering into those markets. To me, that is one of the biggest challenges that we face as Members of Parliament in discussing trade agreements. Are there benefits to rural and coastal communities, and can we take advantage of them?

I was trying to think of a comparison with the point that the Minister is making. Saying that we have open access from day one and they have a 15-year scale-up on TRQs is a little like standing outside a very expensive restaurant knowing that you can walk into it but without being able to afford lunch, dinner or anything on the menu. Maybe I need to work on that one, but I am trying to get to the bottom of whether we are able to give correct and timely information about the benefits of these deals to those who would most likely benefit from them at the start.

Greg Hands: It is a very good question. Mr Mangnall, if I remember correctly, I did a Zoom meeting with your farmers in relation to the Australia and/or New Zealand trade deal. We did a lot of outreach.

It is sometimes a challenging environment. Again, I am not criticising the sequencing, but because we did Australia and New Zealand first—you will remember that there were trade negotiations with the United States at the time—a lot of farmers saw this as being more of a threat than an opportunity. As we go further into other opportunity markets, people will get a more balanced view of the impacts and opportunities of trade.

Q302 **Anthony Mangnall:** Minister Spencer, do you agree with that? Are farmers taking advantage of the Australia trade agreement? Will they be able to scale up and start exporting in greater numbers? What do you project for the rest for 2024 and 2025 in terms of beef and sheep exports?

Sir Mark Spencer: First, we should recognise that, as a country, we import beef. We are a net importer. The opportunity to export beef is often not taken up because there is more opportunity to sell it to UK consumers, and we also have a group of consumers in the UK who are very keen to consume British beef ahead of any foreign beef. There is opportunity to scale that market up in future, but we have not really been able to take advantage of that because of the domestic situation in which we find ourselves and the quite high price of beef in those markets.

I am a British beef farmer, by the way. I should declare my interest. I have a ready market on my doorstep of consumers who want to buy my product at a high price at this moment in time, so I am not looking to export that product because I have a very ready market here at home.

Now, that does not mean to say that we cannot, as a nation, try to find more opportunities to improve and increase the amount of beef that we are producing here in the UK, because we are doing that in a way that is often more environmentally acceptable than it is in other parts of the world. That does bring opportunity in and of itself, in that once countries start to mention the carbon footprint of their production systems, and compare that to UK grassfed beef, then there is a huge commercial advantage to that.

Q303 **Anthony Mangnall:** We use this example in other areas, but let us just take the oil industry, for instance. We are allowing ourselves to say we should carry on drilling oil in the North Sea because we are nearshoring the oil production. We are not producing enough beef for us in this country, so why are we not just trying to scale up our own production to meet our demands, rather than allowing imports that are produced to a different scale and standard from Australia to come over here?

Sir Mark Spencer: We are. That is why we are investing in UK farmers and the sustainable farming incentive. We are giving out grant systems to improve the way in which they manage their slurries and improve their housing. All that is there to buy equipment to try to make them more productive. We are investing in those farmers to invest in their own businesses to make them more productive.

Q304 **Anthony Mangnall:** It is something I am going to come on to later on when we discuss the EU, but from 30 April the common user charge is coming in from the EU, which is going to hike prices on imports that we are taking on fish, meat and dairy products.

I just wonder if either of you want to comment on the impact and what we should be doing in terms of trying to find a way to alleviate those costs, which are going to adversely impact small businesses. The justification so far has been that the common user charge will help us build very effective border checks.

Sir Mark Spencer: We have already recognised that challenge, which is why we have put a cap in place.

Q305 **Anthony Mangnall:** That is what—£140?

Sir Mark Spencer: Yes. Five items is the maximum. That helps SMEs particularly, because I do not want to see those excessive charges put on small and medium enterprises.

It is also worth recognising that, in the impact assessments we have done, over three years we make an assessment that that will make a 0.2% difference in terms of the price of those goods coming in, so that is very small. Compare that to the cost, for example, of a foot and mouth outbreak, which would be utterly disastrous. It cost the UK economy £12 billion last time.

Getting that balance right between keeping ourselves safe in a phytosanitary sense and making sure we allow that trade to flow as easily as possible is the balance we are seeking to strike.

Q306 **Anthony Mangnall:** The Chair started off with a general conversation, a point around the food strategy that is or is not there, and a general point about whether or not we should have a more joined-up trade strategy.

Minister Hands, I just want to move you along a little bit around scrutiny of our trade deals. This has been my hobby horse for the last four years, so I will apologise for the fact that you have heard it many a time. Do you think CRAG is an effective tool?

Greg Hands: Yes, I do. CRAG is an effective tool. I heard a laugh from Mr Gardiner, but he voted for CRAG back in 2010. It is effective and we have shown that, particularly with recent UK trade deals. CPTPP has been exceptionally well scrutinised by both Houses of Parliament.

Q307 **Anthony Mangnall:** You are both giving an extremely good account of yourselves and your Departments, and the hard work that has been undertaken by your civil servants. That is much appreciated. It is interesting to look at what has happened with the merger of the International Trade Committee and the Business Committee, and how there has been a much-improved relationship and scrutiny along the way.

However, I would still argue that there is a little bit more to go. I want you to cast your mind back. Whether or not you were in the Department at the time I cannot remember, but you have been there so many times that I am sure this will have come across your desk. We wrote a report in 2023 on parliamentary scrutiny saying, "The Government must strengthen its commitment to granting a post-negotiation parliamentary debate, ensuring that one is granted if requested in a timely manner, making parliamentary time available." The Government's response to this was to say, "The Government will seek to ensure debates can take place if one is requested." When was the CPTPP debate?

Greg Hands: You are correct, Mr Mangnall, in that there was not a general debate on the CPTPP deal[1] within the CRAG period. However, we were always clear that it depended on the availability of parliamentary time and the usual channels in the usual way.

However, what I would say is, again looking at CPTPP, there were four debates in both Houses on the deal. There were two oral statements.

Q308 **Anthony Mangnall:** Forgive me. Let us be very clear about that. Those debates were on the terms and the legislatively required changes to enact CPTPP.

Greg Hands: No, that was in addition.

Q309 **Anthony Mangnall:** There was no general debate on CPTPP within the CRAG period.

Greg Hands: There were general debates on CPTPP, and then of course we had the legislation, which you have just referred to, which had a Second Reading debate in each House, a Third Reading debate, an

[1] The Minister for Trade Policy corrected the record in correspondence on 2 May 2024. There were five debates in both Houses on the deal.

extensive Committee stage in both Houses, and a Report stage. That is on the specific legislation.

You were on the Bill Committee in the Commons. You will know that the legislation was a very specific aspect of CPTPP, but this is not a deal that has been under-scrutinised. There were 16 written ministerial statements, and five different Select Committees have taken evidence about CPTPP[2]. Do not forget that it is a pre-existing deal, so one could see the deal in advance, dating back to when it was signed in 2018. It is not an under-scrutinised thing.

Q310 **Anthony Mangnall:** The challenge I would put to you is that you are saying that CRAG is working well, and yet a core tenet of CRAG is not taking place, so how is it working?

Greg Hands: Under CRAG you can always pray against something and it is perfectly within the scope of the Opposition or anybody else in Parliament to bring that debate in that way.

Q311 **Anthony Mangnall:** Forgive me. I was not particularly coming on to the vote. I was coming on to the fact of just having the debate within the CRAG process. I do not make any secret of this. I am extremely pro-trade. I am extremely pro the deals that we have signed. I want to stand up in the Chamber during the CRAG process and say to my constituents, "These deals are good."

I am not coming at this from an aggressive point of view, but I am also making this point: if, God forbid, we were not in Government, would you not want to have more rigorous rules and tools in place to hold the Government to account with their own trade agreements?

Greg Hands: I would say to you, Mr Mangnall, that you had quite a few. You probably participated in more CPTPP debates than anybody, except possibly me. You did the Commons ones, the general debates; you took part in the Second Reading debate and in the Commons Committee stage. You took part in the Report stage. There have been quite a few debates on CPTPP. That is my point, even if there was not a specific CRAG debate given, which was due to the lack of availability of parliamentary time earlier this year.

Q312 **Anthony Mangnall:** I am very grateful for you, because flattery will get you everywhere with me on this. I am not bemoaning my lack of engagement at all; I am bemoaning the lack of engagement of Parliament, and that, to me, is the challenge.

If we are to improve that understanding of the trade agreements that we are signing, and if we are to understand the way in which we negotiate our trade agreements, of which there is more parliamentary buy-in, then surely you have to encourage greater co-operation within the Chamber of

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[2] The Minister for Trade Policy corrected the record in correspondence on 2 May 2024. There were 7 written ministerial statements, and officials and ministers have appeared five times in front of Select Committees taking evidence about CPTPP.

the House of Commons to get more Members of Parliament to turn up. In doing so, you do it at a point where it is still meaningful to the process before ratification takes place.

Sir Mark Spencer: As a former business manager, I can say that you have to strike that balance as a business manager as to what Parliament may want to debate and what colleagues across the House may want to engage in.

If you were to offer a debate on global events or other events like the Post Office, or on the CRAG process, I suggest that you would get more colleagues wanting to engage in those other topics at this moment in time. Business managers have to weigh all of that up when deciding what time to allocate to what topic.

Of course, there is always the opportunity for Back-Benchers to go to the Backbench Business Committee with an application to debate any topic of their choosing, and the Backbench Business Committee is allocated time in order to debate that. There has not been that rush of colleagues to the Backbench Business Committee.

Q313 **Anthony Mangnall:** Again, I come back to the point about the proper and effective remit of CRAG, albeit written when we were still part of the European Union, and albeit terribly outdated, despite it being done by the Labour Party. If it is to work, it should have a debate during the CRAG process and during those 21 sitting days, and it should end up with a vote. That has not happened. We have not had both of those scenarios take place together on any one of the brand-new trade agreements that we have signed, whether that be Australia, New Zealand, CPTPP or, indeed, the digital partnership.

I am going to move this on and come back to you on another subject, but that does not strike me as something that is working. Again, if we were in Opposition, it would be a difficult thing for us to see Governments maybe pushing through trade agreements that we do not accept.

Greg Hands: Going back to the legislation for each of those deals, there was the Australia-New Zealand free trade agreements Act and the CPTPP Act. While the legislation was a more limited aspect of both those deals, the debates were very wide ranging, particularly the Second Reading debates, and even the Committee stage. From the Committee stage, as you will recall, there were amendments on environment and labour rights, all of which was rather extraneous to the limited legislation. I would put it to you that, overall, both Houses of Parliament had very extensive debates on CPTPP in particular.

Q314 **Anthony Mangnall:** This may be one that we are not going to agree on at this point, so I will move it on.

One thing that has been an enormously welcome sight is the creation of the Trade and Agriculture Commission and the role that that has. There has been a significant amount of criticism though, both of the TAC and sometimes that the response under section 42 can be too narrow. I just wonder whether either of you want to comment on that criticism.

Greg Hands: I agree with you. It has been a good innovation and has enabled experts to come in and opine on trade deals in advance of the House of Commons or House of Lords giving a view.

I might just add that its view of the trade agreements we have done so far has been broadly positive. We talked about palm oil, and the TAC was quite clear that it did not think that CPTPP would lead to an increase in harmful exploitation to create palm oil.

Q315 **Dr Hudson:** I have a quick follow-up on the Trade and Agriculture Commission. Earlier, we expressed some concern we had heard that it might not have sufficient resource and that the chair was having to use university research funds for administrative support. We called for increased resourcing and we were pleased to hear recently that that resourcing had gone in.

We just wanted to get a snapshot view. Do you feel that, moving forward, the TAC, when it is looking at future deals, is adequately resourced? We have seen the response that it has increased resource, but from both your Departments do you feel it is adequately resourced to do the job that the Government are asking it to do?

Greg Hands: To be honest, Dr Hudson, I have not seen or had any recent interaction on this topic that makes me feel that it might be a problem, but I had better write to you in terms of where we are at the moment on resourcing of the Trade and Agriculture Commission. Nothing has come across my desk to suggest that there is an issue.

Q316 **Dr Hudson:** It is an important mechanism in terms of scrutiny and doing assessments, so we need to know that it is match fit as we move forward into new arrangements as well. It would be helpful if you could follow up on that.

Greg Hands: Between us, or whichever the most appropriate part of Government is, we could write to the Committee on the resourcing of the Trade and Agriculture Commission and where we are at the moment.

Dr Hudson: Thank you very much. That is very helpful.

Chair: If anyone watching at home is confused by what CRAG refers to, it is the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act, which sets out a statutory period where Parliament can scrutinise trade deals. As Mr Mangnall says, it was not necessarily followed to the letter, although we have heard from the Minister that the spirit of that scrutiny possibly did happen.

Barry Gardiner: We should have Mr Mangnall back with our Committee more often.

Anthony Mangnall: It is not helping my career, Barry, if you say that.

Q317 **Barry Gardiner:** Can I pick the Minister up on one small point? He said it was open to anybody to object within the period, and therefore to produce such a debate, but of course the objection does not necessarily entail that a debate would follow. It simply entails that the Government have to go back to the beginning of the 21-day period. I just thought it was important to correct the record on that.

Minister Spencer, I wanted to focus on standards, and particularly the core standards that we have talked about many times—sanitary and phytosanitary standards, but also animal welfare standards and environmental standards.

The Chair wrote to say that those standards should be a precondition of liberalising tariffs on agrifood products in our trade agreements. The first Trade and Agriculture Commission recommended the same. The national food strategy recommended the same. The Climate Change Committee recommended the same. The British Egg Industry Council, the National Farmers' Union, the Scottish Government and, dare I say, even the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation recommended the same. Why did the Government not agree? What do you know that all those bodies have failed to understand?

Sir Mark Spencer: We have been very clear on a number of products. The Prime Minister has been explicit that we will not allow hormone-treated beef, for example, or chlorinated chicken to be imported into the UK, so it is possible to do it in that sense.

We have to recognise that climates and production systems are different around the world. I would give you a very simple example. We could probably all sit here and agree that free-range chickens are much better than housed chickens. I want my eggs to be produced by free-range chickens if it all possible. If I were a chicken in Canada, however, where the temperature goes to minus 40°C, it would be pretty challenging to be a free-range chicken. I put it to you that it would be unfair then to ban Canadian eggs or Canadian poultry on the grounds that they did not keep their chickens outside. We need to recognise that climates and systems around the world are different, so we need to take an objective view as to how strict we can be. That is the danger of writing those rules in a flat sense.

Q318 **Chair:** What about mulesing, the process that is used in Australia for some sheep? That is very concerning. Obviously, we import lamb.

Sir Mark Spencer: If I were an Australian, I would say to you, "It is illegal to import or produce foie gras in Australia, but you Brits allow it to be imported into the UK. You are not meeting our standards." We need to recognise that there are different standards around the world. It is quite important that we do not lecture the world on this and say that we are the best, because we would react pretty negatively to that if people did it to us. In a soft way, using our soft power and our influence, we should try to lift the bar as much as we can by demonstrating what can be achieved in terms of welfare and our environmental footprint.

Q319 **Barry Gardiner:** Do other countries have core standards?

Sir Mark Spencer: I do not know the answer to that because I am not across all of the detail of their trade policies. I do not know whether all other countries have those standards. We clearly have lines in the sand that we will not cross, but we are also flexible enough to recognise that systems and climates are different.

Q320 **Barry Gardiner:** No one on this Committee or, indeed, in any of the multiplicity of organisations that I have just cited would say that one should not understand the circumstances that products produced in other parts of the world are coming from. To that extent, that flexibility, as you presented it, Minister Spencer, is just common sense. It does not mean that there should not be a core set of standards that we adhere to. It is possible to frame regulation and those standards in such a way that they capture minus 40°C in Canada and other different contexts.

You have not provided a counter-argument to all those organisations that say environmental standards, animal welfare standards and SPS should be something fundamental. Of course, we understand that there will be different contexts, but this can form a core that can be a levelling-up.Indeed, one of the problems that we felt with the lack of core standards in the New Zealand and Australian agreements was that there were knock-on effects from that when it came to the CPTPP. This goes back to our half discussion earlier. As a result of that, because there was no equivalency language on animal welfare, the Canadians were able to negotiate larger TRQs on pork meat and beef. In fact, earlier you said that you had done rather well in that area. The opposite is true, is it not? They were able to negotiate larger TRQs.

Sir Mark Spencer: I do not recognise that at all.

Q321 **Barry Gardiner:** What do you not recognise—that they were able to negotiate larger TRQs?

Sir Mark Spencer: I do not recognise that it was a better deal for them. That was a very good deal for UK ag. To go back to your original question, we have always been explicit. We will never compromise on consumer safety. That is, of course, an uncrossable line. We will always make sure the food that we import in those trade deals is safe.

Q322 **Barry Gardiner:** Is that a core standard?

Sir Mark Spencer: That is a core standard, in effect.

Q323 **Barry Gardiner:** If we can have a core standard there, why can we not have it elsewhere?

Sir Mark Spencer: The point I am making is that we have, in effect, those other core standards, as the Prime Minister was explicit that we would never allow hormone-treated beef and chlorinated chicken.

Q324 **Barry Gardiner:** But we would allow mulesing, where they cut the backside of a sheep.

Sir Mark Spencer: Again, you need to recognise that there are different systems around the world.

Q325 **Barry Gardiner:** That is the point of core standards. We recognise that there are different systems around the world. Some of them are not acceptable.

Sir Mark Spencer: Of course, we need to operate within the WTO rules, because, if we found ourselves in a place where we are operating outside of the WTO rules, we would be taken to court and we would lose.

We need to use that soft power and our influence, as you are indicating, to try to improve standards around the world, to improve environmental footprint and welfare. That is what we are seeking to do, but if you have a set of bureaucratic rules that are inflexible you will disadvantage yourself from doing those trade deals and getting the advantage that comes with them.

Greg Hands: Mr Gardiner, you are mixing up a little bit the standards debate and the TRQs. Of course, the TRQ is there for produce that meets our standards, so whatever increased TRQ that there was for Canada in CPTPP would be for products that meet our standards. The important thing to get across is that free trade agreements do not change our standards.

Q326 **Barry Gardiner:** Minister, let me explain why it did have an impact. The Trade and Animal Welfare Coalition explained that concerns about the Australian FTA setting a precedent then materialised within the CPTPP. It did not contain any equivalence language on animal welfare standards, and because of that the Canadians were able to obtain that concession and get larger TRQs on pork meat, chicken and beef.

Greg Hands: Whatever the larger TRQ might have been, whatever produce gets imported still has to meet our import standards. There is no change. Nothing has changed in our import standards since we started negotiating free trade agreements. Everything imported must meet them.

Q327 **Barry Gardiner:** It cannot if we do not have those core import standards.

Greg Hands: Of course we have import standards on all products imported into the country, whether it be agrifood or anything else. Everything must meet our import standards, and nothing has changed in that regard under any FTA negotiation, including the CPTPP.

Barry Gardiner: Indeed, and, because there were no equivalent standards in the Australian deal, then the negotiations were able to allow a greater expanse within the CPTPP deal. That was exactly the accusation—let me put it that way—that the Trade and Animal Welfare Coalition was making.

Let us move on. We have talked about standards. It seems to me that what you are trying to do through the consultation on fairer food labelling is, in effect, to introduce standards by the back door, and to put the onus on to the consumer to enforce the standards that the consumer likes or dislikes.

Chair: There is usually a retailer in between, which will also have its own standards.

Q328 **Barry Gardiner:** Indeed, and often, if sales are going into the restaurant trade, for example, you will have no way of knowing what was on the label in the first place.

You have looked at country of origination labelling and method of production labelling. Obviously, method of production labelling is particularly relevant here, but it is a five-tier label system that you are talking about. How do you respond to the charge that that is going to be a pretty ineffective substitute for tighter import rules and core standards in the trade agreements? That is because there is that filter before the ultimate consumer, in some cases, and also because, if it is a five-tier labelling system, it is going to be pretty complex. What about all the criticism that consumers buy on habit rather than necessarily going and looking at all the labels all the time?

Sir Mark Spencer: I am not sure that is true. Free-range egg production is the best example of that. Once consumers understood and were informed, they made that choice, and we have pretty much seen egg production in the UK move towards the free-range model, driven solely by consumers.

An informed consumer is something that UK ag production has a huge amount to gain from, because our welfare standards and production systems are more sustainable and of higher welfare. The more informed consumers we have, the more choice is available to those consumers, and they can make the right choice.

Barry Gardiner: I am all in favour of informed consumers, but forgive me. Was it not only two or three months ago—perhaps the Chair can remind me on this one—when we were talking about the labelling of free-range eggs in this Committee? It was the Government who were deciding that they should not be correctly labelled.

Chair: That was because of the housing order.

Q329 **Barry Gardiner:** You could have made a regulation saying that this had to be correctly labelled. You did not. As a result, you allowed into this country all these eggs to be labelled as free range that were not, and you kept the consumer in blissful ignorance. It is a bit rich now to come and say to me, “It is a wonderful example of the consumer seeing what is going on and making the choice.”

Sir Mark Spencer: You are conflating lots of issues there. We should be clear so that people watching this understand what happened in those circumstances. We were in the middle of an avian flu epidemic.

Q330 **Barry Gardiner:** Birds were quite rightly kept indoors.

Sir Mark Spencer: That is right, and so there comes then a question of after what period, when a bird is housed, it becomes not a free-range bird. We made a decision as a Government to extend that period of time that those birds were kept indoors without having to change the labelling from free range to barn reared. That was the right decision at the time to support the sector.

Q331 **Barry Gardiner:** What was that period of time?

Sir Mark Spencer: The maximum was 16 weeks. We decided to extend that period of time. Now we are out of avian influenza, so we are back to the status quo.

Q332 **Barry Gardiner:** What was the extension?

Sir Mark Spencer: At the time we did not know how long the epidemic was going to continue, so it was a rolling extension.

Q333 **Barry Gardiner:** You were prepared to extend it for an indefinite period and have the consumer not understand that those chickens were not free range but quite properly housed.

Sir Mark Spencer: Yes, because those egg producers were under severe pressure from avian influenza. Through no choice of their own, they were not keeping those birds outside. We did distinguish between those people who were forced to keep those birds inside and those who were choosing to through a different system.

Q334 **Barry Gardiner:** You could have done that through labelling but you chose not to.

Sir Mark Spencer: That would be overcomplicating the challenge in a very difficult situation, but we are not here to talk about the labelling of free-range eggs. The point is that we want informed consumers. We want them to make the right choice. Throughout the sector, we have seen retailers and processors make the right choice when their consumers are informed.

Q335 **Barry Gardiner:** You will be aware of the Which? research that found that most participants did not believe that labelling was an effective way of managing food standards and quality in the long term, because, it said, food buying is habitual, so people do not pay a great deal of attention to the labels. People do not feel the need to scrutinise labels because they trust UK standards, which is a good thing. The language on the labels is not always clear, and it is impossible to fit all the standards on to a label to make an informed choice.

Here we are looking at a label that is going to have five different tier systems, so it will be quite complicated for the consumer to understand exactly what is going on. Do you really think that that is a viable alternative to just setting those core standards?

Sir Mark Spencer: Again, we want to give consumers choice. We want to make sure that that is an informed choice, and we have seen the market respond to that in lots of ways.

If you take a company like McDonald's, for example, there is a reason that McDonald's has committed to 100% UK beef and 100% free-range eggs in all its products. It recognises that those consumers care about those issues, and it is a market advantage to McDonald's to make that commitment. That is something that we should celebrate and allow consumers to make that choice.

Q336 **Barry Gardiner:** I am very pleased when big chains do that. They are buying British, and that is a good thing, but you will be aware that most small restaurant outlets and small food producers are not able to achieve the same as those large companies can. There is a lack of transparency then for people who buy their products.

Sir Mark Spencer: I am not sure that is true. If you go to your local pub this weekend, it would be perfectly legitimate to ask your waiter or waitress, "Can you tell me if this steak is from the UK or imported?" It would be perfectly legitimate to ask that question, and you can then make an informed choice as to whether you want to have steak or lamb, for example.

Q337 **Barry Gardiner:** We are talking about things like egg products that are in baked goods. You understand that there is a complete failure of transparency. There is no labelling down to that level. In effect, you are asking the consumer to take on a responsibility that all those organisations that I started off talking about really believe is a Government one.

Let me move on to talk about how the Government measure and mitigate the potential costs to businesses in the UK as a result of the proposals that you have to introduce the "not for EU" labelling requirements. You both have rightly spoken about not wanting to put additional cost burdens on to UK producers, but it is estimated by the Food and Drink Federation that that will cost British business almost a quarter of a billion pounds a year.

Sir Mark Spencer: We continue to engage with the sector to try to mitigate any impact of that labelling, but it is worth putting on record that we will not do anything that puts at risk the Windsor framework or the Good Friday agreement. We should recognise and celebrate the fact that Stormont is now up and running.

Q338 **Barry Gardiner:** You are well aware, Minister, that there was no requirement to do this by the Windsor framework. I understand the reason why the Government did it. They did not want to disincentivise manufacturers and producers in this country from reaching any part of the UK market. That is an understandable aim, but of course the potential financial burden is something that the industry itself is telling you is grossly disproportionate and unacceptable.

Sir Mark Spencer: We understand that challenge. We are working with the sector to try to mitigate that challenge and to reduce those costs wherever possible, but we cannot do anything that will jeopardise the Windsor framework or the Good Friday agreement.

Q339 **Barry Gardiner:** Please stop saying that, because you know it does not jeopardise the Windsor framework in any way. It is the Government making a political decision that is going to impact those businesses adversely.

Sir Mark Spencer: There is clearly a political decision to make sure Northern Ireland feels part of the United Kingdom, and to try to keep that trade flowing as freely as possible.

Q340 **Barry Gardiner:** Do you believe that labelling all food products that we produce here as not for sale in the EU will make people in Northern Ireland feel better about the Windsor framework, Minister?

Sir Mark Spencer: I am saying that they are very delicate issues that are probably well above my pay grade as a Defra Minister. We need to get that balance right in that we want to make sure we do not cause political unrest within Northern Ireland, while allowing Northern Ireland consumers to benefit from the same great products we have in England, Wales and Scotland.

Q341 **Barry Gardiner:** It is a decision taken for party political purposes.

Sir Mark Spencer: No, it is not party political at all.

Q342 **Barry Gardiner:** But it was for political purposes.

Sir Mark Spencer: For political purposes, yes.

Q343 **Chair:** We have had evidence that certain goods were not available in Northern Ireland because of the need for additional documentation. I guess the "not for EU" labelling is part of that.

There is one thing that did slightly surprise me. I was talking to a manufacturer of cat food produced in France, which has been asked to label that product "not for EU" despite the fact that it is produced in the EU from products sourced within the EU. That seemed a little bit strange to me.

Sir Mark Spencer: I am not familiar with that product or where it is produced.

Chair: It is produced in France.

Sir Mark Spencer: It is produced within the EU.

Chair: Yes.

Sir Mark Spencer: That would be a question for the EU.

Q344 **Chair:** To export it, they have to have two different sorts of packaging. For the UK market, they have to label that "not for EU" even though the product is produced to EU standards and they sell the same product in the Republic of Ireland. There are some strange anomalies there that we hope could be ironed out.

Sir Mark Spencer: Of course, we continue to work with the sector to try to reduce the impact of those anomalies and get that trade flowing as freely as possible across all parts of the United Kingdom, so that there are no barriers in place between England, Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland. We want Northern Ireland to feel included in the UK, but we want to do that in the very delicate political circumstances that Northern Ireland finds itself in.

Q345 **Selaine Saxby:** Good afternoon, gentlemen. How will the UK ensure that CPTPP accession does not result in increased imports of palm oil that contribute to deforestation and the destruction of habitats for critically endangered wildlife?

Greg Hands: First of all, the Trade and Agriculture Commission gave us a pretty good clean bill of health when it came to palm oil and CPTPP, as one of the subjects that it looked at very closely.

Secondly, you will know that the UK has an increasingly good record on making sure palm oil comes from sustainable sources. The percentage of UK imports of palm oil that are certified as being sustainable has gone from 16% in 2010 to 72% in 2021, so a big increase. Obviously, we want to go further still.

As Minister Spencer mentioned earlier, we also have a joint statement with Malaysia on forest and sustainable commodity production that is showing real commitments to make sure that palm oil is as sustainable as possible in the market. There is quite a lot going on there to improve the situation with Malaysia.

I might also add that, of course, Malaysia is one of the big opportunities in CPTPP. Previously, there was no free trade agreement between the UK and Malaysia, so the ability to sell agrifood produce into Malaysia is one of the big benefits of CPTPP at the same time.

Sir Mark Spencer: It is again a demonstration of where our soft power can improve things. We have been able to give the Malaysians a nudge in the right direction through that trade deal, and doing a joint statement has made them move more quickly than they would have otherwise. It is a good example of the UK using its influence around the world through its trading relationships to try to improve the environment in general.

Q346 **Selaine Saxby:** Coming back to Minister Hands, why were the trade negotiations with Canada paused in January? When will you resume those negotiations?

Greg Hands: They were paused for a variety of reasons, but mainly because we were not making the progress that we wanted to. We found that Canada had not done things that many of our other trade partners had done, like extend the rules of origin accumulation rules with the EU on automobiles. For example, South Korea and other trade partners had done that; Canada was very much the exception there.

We stand ready to recommence those trade talks. We have a trade agreement with Canada. Canada is a party to CPTPP, which we are hoping to have enter into force in this country later this year. We have a good trading situation with Canada. It is not like we do not have a trade agreement at all. We have the existing deal and we have CPTPP membership, so it is not a gloomy position, and we stand ready to restart those talks.

Q347 **Selaine Saxby:** How will you respond if Canada continues to insist on the UK reversing its current ban on hormone-treated beef as part of a trade agreement?

Greg Hands: We have been absolutely clear in the Prime Minister's statement last year, as DBT and Defra, that the UK will not be accepting hormone-treated beef into this country. There is a cast-iron guarantee of that, which Canada has always understood.

Q348 **Selaine Saxby:** Minister Spencer, how are the Government supporting UK cheese exporters who have been negatively affected by the expiry of temporary UK access to the EU quota for exports to Canda? How far will CPTPP accession make up for this, given concerns over Canada's manipulation of its CPTPP dairy quota?

Sir Mark Spencer: There are some opportunities in CPTPP for dairy producers, but we also continue to look for other opportunities, supporting through our attaché network and with other trade partners around the world to try to find new opportunities.

We are starting to build a reputation for having good-quality cheese that consumers around the world want to buy. There have been examples of where we are now sending stilton to the US, so we have some really strong brands in the cheese world.

Chair: Mention Wensleydale at this point, Minister.

Sir Mark Spencer: I am sure there will be other bids from other members for their own local cheese, but it demonstrates the passion that we have for UK dairy produce and the opportunities that that brings.

While it is disappointing that we have lost that opportunity in Canada, I am sure it is even more disappointing for many Canadians who enjoyed consuming our cheese. Of course, they can do that through other means through general trade, just not through a free trade agreement that we could have negotiated or through the old EU quota.

Q349 **Dr Hudson:** Minister Hands, I just wanted to touch on global Britain and our soft power. We have the highest animal welfare standards and production standards in the world, and we have talked today about being able to nudge our friends and allies in a similar sort of direction.

One of the key issues, and a really positive side of the New Zealand and the Australian trade agreements, was the insertion of animal welfare chapters, which was an excellent provision. The CPTPP does not have bespoke animal welfare chapters, and we are coming into that arrangement after it has been set up, but I am aware that these treaties will then be looked at every five years.

Now we are in that club, is there scope, with global Britain's soft power, to ask whether we can insert some animal welfare chapter mechanism to allow us all to move in the right direction in terms of where we stand on values, animal welfare and production standards?"

Greg Hands: Dr Hudson, you ask a very valid question. There is a review of CPTPP by the existing parties and members currently taking place this year. I would encourage people to participate and to feed in their views. The UK, of course, is not yet a party to CPTPP. That will come later this year, but we will take an active role in the five-year review. Obviously, we are not currently members, but it might give us a different insight on joining, and that is certainly something I will bear in mind.

Q350 **Barry Gardiner:** Minister Hands, could I ask you to give us an update on the India trade deal? There have been 14 rounds so far. We were originally hoping for it be concluded by Diwali. Diwali, like spring, seems to be a movable feast, given that it was the Diwali 18 months ago, not last October.

Chair: We are still waiting for spring this year.

Barry Gardiner: I think we are due a response by spring, Chair. We have now seen the Indian Government go into an election period, which makes it very difficult for them. Theirs is a very long election period of three months, so it will make it very difficult to conclude that deal within that election period. Thereafter, it could well be that we are in an election period. What do you see as the sweet spot within which a UK-India trade deal might be landed?

Greg Hands: Mr Gardiner, you are right that India is currently in an extended pre-election period.

Barry Gardiner: No, the election has started.

Greg Hands: Yes, but in terms of the period before the result of the election. It would not be right to comment on what is a live negotiation, but you will know that the opportunities in doing a free trade agreement with India are huge. This is a market of 1.4 billion consumers that quite often has exceptionally high tariffs, such as 150% on whiskey and 125% on autos. These are big opportunities for us, but you will also know that India is aware of that and will sometimes be a negotiation partner that approaches these things in the same thing we would, looking at the benefits for the Indian economy and the Indian consumer. It is a live negotiation, but I stress the opportunities there, particularly for the UK agrifood sector. India imports £21.7 billion worth of agrifoods annually, less than 1% of which originate in the UK. That will give you an idea of the opportunity for UK agrifood exporters.

Q351 **Barry Gardiner:** I am sure you know that I am a wholehearted supporter of concluding that trade deal. I just wondered if we had any idea when the sweet spot for delivery might be.

Let me look more widely at the FTAs that are going to be concluded. You will be acutely aware that the Paris agreement is now in its ratcheting phase for NDCs—nationally determined contributions. Increasingly, as we negotiate trade deals, it will be important to consider how countries are faring in terms of their obligations under the Paris agreement. How do you see us incorporating those concerns into future trade deals, perhaps with the GCC?

Greg Hands: We have had some successes here. You will know that the Australia free trade agreement has a comprehensive environment chapter in it, and for the first time Australia has written into a free trade agreement the Paris agreement, which is helpful.

Different negotiations with different counterparties may have different results, but one of our key negotiation objectives is to make sure that there is good, strong, positive language on climate.

Sir Mark Spencer: Sir Robert, forgive me. I have a statutory instrument that I am meant to deliver very soon.

Q352 **Chair:** My final question can probably be answered by Minister Hands. It is about our trade with the EU and other international partners.

Many people now take for granted the fact that we have a trade deal with the EU. I can remember that, during the Brexit debate during the referendum, there were suggestions that, if we did not get a deal, there would be a 40% tariff on our lamb and it would be disastrous for UK farmers.

The European Union remains the UK’s most significant trading partner for agrifood products. What steps are the Government taking to reduce cross-border regulatory requirements and decrease costs for UK traders? I am particularly thinking about the situation through Dover and the border target operating system, which is supposed to go live on 30 April.

Greg Hands: To be honest, Sir Robert, that would have been a question better put to Minister Spencer. The Cabinet Office leads overall on the border target operating model, and Defra will lead on the agrifood aspects. I might ask Ms Morrison to comment on behalf of Defra there.

Q353 **Chair:** There have been some very worrying reports in the *Financial Times* that it will go live, but there will be a 0% initial check level.

Greg Hands: If you read the blog on the Defra website, it is strongly committed to having those checks go live later in April. The first part of your question was really about exports. I engage with my European counterparts. I have regular meetings with EU member state Trade Ministers where we talk about trade barriers that have arisen on a member state level, and we also interact with Brussels frequently at a Commission level to make sure that any trade barriers are overcome.

Deborah Morrison: As the Minister said, the checks are going ahead on 30 April. The Government are completely confident that we have the capacity and the set-up right at the Sevington border control post, which will be the primary port for Dover for those checks to be rolled out on 30 April.

Chair: We will possibly be looking at visiting Sevington and Dover to see that in place, because this has been delayed five times. The industry is very concerned about the delay, the necessary electronic systems being in place, and whether, from an animal and human health point of view, those checks will be sufficiently rigorous.

Thank you very much indeed for your time. We will pull stumps there, as time has marched on.