



International Trade Committee

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Rt Hon Anne-Marie Trevelyan
Secretary of State for International Trade
Department for International Trade
Old Admiralty Building
London
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15 June 2022

Dear Anne-Marie,

I was very displeased to receive your letter yesterday, giving my Committee advance notice that you would be laying the UK-Australia free trade agreement (FTA) for the purposes of CRaG today.

Despite our long correspondence on matters related to this, you appear to still be under the impression that it is either acceptable or reasonable for this Government to do as it wishes, and to treat this Committee and Parliament appallingly, and still say you are “committed to transparency”.

While we have welcomed the time with the Agreement itself, much of which was given to enable the Trade and Agriculture Commission time to produce its statutory report, you have repeatedly failed to tell us how much time we have to scrutinise the agreement, take evidence, write and publish our report. You cannot, by virtue of running down the clock, retrospectively look back and claim a success by virtue of our having had what you consider to be plenty of time. The important factor is knowing how long we will have and being able to plan our work and the depth of our scrutiny accordingly. We have sought to gain this kind of clarity for months and you have continued to avoid providing direct answers.

The failures and discourtesies of the Government in this matter are too numerous to repeat here, but there is one implication that I cannot let stand. You suggest – incorrectly – that you have attempted to be flexible in finding time to meet with us and we have been the blocker in finding an early opportunity. As previously discussed, on 31 March we first called you to give evidence for two hours on 28 April. This request was ignored until the last minute. To suggest that the 11 May offer was a reasonable one is absurd because your office offered only one hour rather than two we had asked for. When we made clear that the full two hours were required, we were told you couldn't give any more time on that day. We have subsequently offered a host of meeting options across multiple days and times without success, with some offers from your office seemingly calculated to be insulting or otherwise ignorant of the other demands on Members' time. While you say your diary may not be as flexible as you would like, your office has all but actively obstructed any attempt to find a solution, digging its heels in and refusing to make us aware of the range of times you would be available, instead begrudgingly making suggestions that they must have known were unworkable for any Committee. To even suggest the delay in seeing you is in any way down to my Committee is unacceptable.

Despite all this, we eventually managed to find a time you could fit us in, and we were clear that this was on the assumption that CRaG wouldn't be triggered beforehand – seeking direct assurance from your officials on this fact. This was not provided and we instead got your letter yesterday – despite the many past undertakings from you that we would have enough time to undertake our scrutiny before CRaG was triggered, and your own assurance to Mr Speaker that it would not be triggered before we had reported. We are now seeing you nearly halfway through the CRaG period, which make it very challenging to publish a complete report covering the whole FTA and your responses to our questions in time to inform the debate in the House we will be seeking.

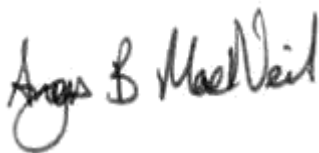
You seem to feel that we should have worked at the pace you wanted, and anything else is either unreasonable or slow. It is apparently necessary to remind you that we are a Committee of 11 Members with a small staff – we do not have the resources of your various teams when looking at FTA negotiations. When we say we need enough time, and to know what time we have in advance, this is not an attempt to drag our heels, it is because we take our role in scrutiny exceptionally seriously and want to ensure we can plan it in a way to deliver the best possible outcomes.

The Committee met today and will be working at pace to give the House our report in the time available, but I have to register again our deep frustration with how the Government has handled this whole process. You continue to show no real regard for the scrutiny role of my Committee, or even that of Parliament, and there is no indication that this will change for the better. This pattern of behaviour sets a dangerous and deeply disrespectful precedent for future FTA scrutiny.

I am copying this letter to the Chairs of the International Agreements Committee, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, and the Liaison Committee, given their related interest. I am additionally copying this letter to the Prime Minister, Mr Speaker, and the Leader of the House.

In accordance with our usual practice, this letter, along with any replies, will be published on the Committee's webpage.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Angus B MacNeil". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'A'.

Angus Brendan MacNeil
Chair of the International Trade Committee