



## Department for International Trade

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Angus Brendan MacNeil MP  
International Trade Committee  
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16 March 2020

Dear Angus,

I am writing in response to your letter of 29 January, where you welcomed the Government's recent commitments in relation to transparency and scrutiny of free trade agreements. In your letter you sought clarity on several areas in relation to our commitments in this area. This response follows my initial reply of 24 February.

### **Providing oral updates to your Committee**

You asked that in my Department's private briefings to your Committee, covering sensitive aspects on the progress of negotiations, that you are able to speak with those officials with specific expertise. In these private briefings to date you have been able to speak with Ministers and Chief Negotiators on the substance of negotiations. My Department has also submitted written evidence to your Committee covering substantial policy detail. It is standard practice that only Senior Civil Servant officials provide oral evidence to Select Committees. I would stress that Chief Negotiators are the senior officials responsible for the delivery of specific negotiations and are best placed to provide insight into live negotiations.

In your private briefing with John Alty and Chris Barton on 25 February, your Committee sought to increase the frequency of the private briefings the Committee receives on the progress of negotiations. I am happy to support this. To manage this increased workload for your Committee and my Department, I propose writing to you once the dates for the next negotiation round are fixed with partners. Where known, I would also include a broad summary of what I expected to be covered in that round. Considering this, your Committee could make an informed decision as to whether you wished to book a briefing or not, which my Department would be content to facilitate. You should be aware that negotiations towards our proposed accession to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), will not operate in formal "rounds". I am content to explore the appropriate frequency of briefings for this specific negotiation with you in due course.

## **Committee report on new free trade agreements**

As you state in your letter, for our negotiations with the United States, Australia, New Zealand and the CPTPP, the Government has committed to endeavour to provide the Committee with a reasonable time before the final agreement is laid in Parliament under the Constitutional Reform and Governance (CRaG) Act procedure, to produce a report on the agreement.

As you will be aware, my officials have been working closely with the relevant Parliamentary authorities to find a pragmatic approach for how our new FTAs may be initially presented to Parliament ahead of the start of the 21 sitting day period under CRaG. We have in mind the Government's new statutory obligations in the Agriculture Act and Trade Bill, and the need to provide your Committee with sufficient time to be able to produce its report – gathering evidence from whoever you see fit. These discussions are progressing well, and I understand your officials are looped into them. I will update you further in due course.

## **Public commitment of negotiations over next 12 months**

In your letter, you have asked for a summary of the negotiations that my Department intends to progress over the next 12 months. I am happy to confirm that over the next 12 months, we intend to further progress FTA negotiations with the United States, Australia and New Zealand and begin new FTA negotiations with CPTPP, Canada and Mexico. For Canada and Mexico will be looking to substantially build on our existing FTAs with them. We will also be progressing a digital economy agreement with Singapore. In addition, my Department continues to scope out additional negotiation opportunities to further UK interests, paying particular interest to opportunities with India that could be pursued later this year. I am happy to write to you as and when these opportunities develop. I hope this is helpful in aiding your planning for the year ahead.

## **Future approach to scrutiny of free trade agreements**

As you are aware, up to now the Government has confined commitments around its enhanced transparency and scrutiny arrangements for new FTAs to negotiations with the United States, Australia, New Zealand and accession to CPTPP. This was to prevent conflation with our continuity programme negotiations and to enable us to ensure these arrangements proved fit for purpose before applying them more widely. I can confirm my intention to further extend the principle of these arrangements to new FTA negotiations.

This includes a commitment to undertake a public consultation/call for input, publish negotiating objectives, an initial scoping assessment and a Government response to the consultation/call for input before starting negotiations. In addition, should your Committee produce a report on these objectives and as part of this recommend a debate, then the Government will seek to accommodate a request, subject to available Parliamentary time. During negotiations, the Government will publish regular updates – usually after each substantive negotiating round, and undertake close engagement with the relevant Select Committees, including providing oral and written evidence in public and private. At the conclusion of negotiations, the Government will publish an independently scrutinised impact assessment, facilitate time for the relevant Select Committees to produce a report on the agreement and seek to accommodate a debate, subject to available Parliamentary time.

I hope this provides clarity and reassurance to your Committee as you plan for the year ahead. I would be happy to meet with your Committee to discuss these matters further on 17 March as requested.

I am copying this letter to the International Agreements Committee, whom I intend to also benefit from these arrangements.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Elizabeth Truss', is centered on the page. The signature is fluid and cursive.

**THE RT HON ELIZABETH TRUSS MP**  
Secretary of State for International Trade  
& President of the Board of Trade