



Department for
International Trade



Department for
Business, Energy
& Industrial Strategy

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31st January 2022

Dear Dianne,

Thank you for your letter of 24th of January and for the opportunity to meet the Committee on 20th January. I understand the Committee's concerns on these issues, and I am pleased to have the opportunity to clarify some misapprehensions.

Regarding my comments on debates, I can confirm that there is no intention to 'row back' from the position that the Government will seek to accommodate relevant requests for debates on new FTAs where parliamentary time allows. Where I believe there is a point of difference between us is that the Government regards those comments as commitments from the dispatch box, rather than elevating them to the status of a convention in line with the Ponsonby Rule. Given that we cannot foresee future pressures on Parliamentary time, it would be unwise and inappropriate to elevate this commitment to an established Parliamentary convention. Whilst my department may do everything it can to facilitate a debate, the business of the House remains the responsibility of others.

For the avoidance of any doubt, I am happy to reiterate that I stand behind the position that I outlined in the House:

*"If the International Agreements Committee should publish a report on those objectives, I can confirm that the Government will gladly consider that report with interest and, should it be requested, facilitate a debate on the objectives, subject to the parliamentary time available"*¹

*"I would like to state from the Dispatch Box that I cannot envisage a new FTA proceeding to ratification without a debate first having taken place on it, should one have been requested in a timely fashion by the committee."*²

The Government has shown its commitment to this policy, by facilitating the following debates following a request from the IAC:

- 17 September 2020 - Japan
- 14 October 2021 - Iceland, Norway and Lichtenstein
- 29 June 2021 - Ghana and Cameroon
- 5 January 2022 - Ukraine Credit Support
- 1 Feb 2022 - CPTTP Accession

¹ [Hansard](#), Volume 810, Column 724, 23/02/2021

² [Hansard](#), Volume 810, Column 724, 23/02/2021

Turning to your concern that the Government response did not cover the commitments made by the previous Secretary of State for International Trade to the ITC in March 2021.

Given how seriously the Government takes the commitments it has made to Parliament it was felt unnecessary to repeat reassurances that had already been given to committees of both Houses. However, I would like to take this opportunity to reaffirm the undertakings that we have already made. In particular I would highlight the following which was included in the response to your Committee's report:

"The Government welcomes the Committee's observations regarding the steps that we have taken in relation to free trade agreements (FTAs). As the Government has previously stated, the length, breadth of scope and complexity, as well as the impact, of FTAs warrants the specific regime of engagement and information provision that the Government has developed. We look forward to continuing to engage constructively with the Committee as we deliver our ambitious trade policy objectives."

The Government response also outlined the extensive work undertaken by my officials and the Parliamentary authorities to enable pre-CRaG publication of the Australia FTA. The need to publish the agreement in a way that did not trigger CRaG stemmed in part from commitments that we had made to the committees and is a further illustration of the Government's commitments to scrutiny of new FTAs.

Finally, I will address the points that you raise about the suggested concordat between the Government and the committees of both Houses. The Government remains firmly committed to all the undertakings it has made. Indeed, in some cases we are going further, and I would highlight my department's response to your Committee's report on the CPTPP agreement, where we have extended our text sharing commitments, as evidence of this.

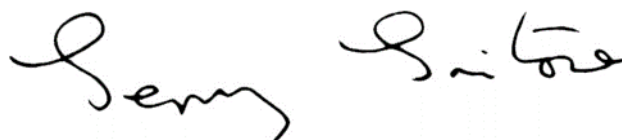
The Government has only just signed the UK's first 'from scratch' Free Trade Agreement since leaving the EU. I believe that many valuable lessons will be learned from the experience of the scrutiny of the Australia FTA and that embarking on the negotiation of a formal concordat at this time would hamper our ability to pragmatically adopt best practice in the long term. As we stated in the response, we will continue to review our position on this, and my officials will continue to work closely with the Clerks of the Committee both on this issue and more broadly.

I hope that this letter has clarified the Government's position on these issues and allayed your concerns about our approach to the scrutiny of the UK's future FTAs. I would be happy to discuss these issues further with you if you would like clarification. My officials would also be very happy to discuss these matters with your Clerks to provide further reassurance if that would be beneficial.

I look forward to continuing to build a positive and constructive relationship with your Committee as we continue to deliver our ambitious trade policy objectives.

I am copying this letter to the Rt Hon Amanda Milling MP, Minister of State in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

Yours ever,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Grimstone', written in a cursive style.

Lord Grimstone of Boscobel, Kt
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Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy