

6th November 2020

Dear Constituents,

I have been contacted by a number of constituents about the Agriculture Bill, many raising very similar points. So I hope you will forgive me for grouping my response to the issues raised into one letter.

The Agriculture Bill

This Bill will allow ambitious new land management schemes to be introduced in England, based on the principle of public money for public goods. This means that farmers and land managers who protect our environment, improve animal welfare and produce high quality food in a more sustainable way can be rewarded. The Bill will help farmers to stay competitive, with measures to increase productivity and to invest in new technology. I am pleased that transparency in the supply chain will also be improved to help food producers strengthen their position at the farm gate and seek a fairer return from the marketplace.

British consumers want high quality produce, and if our trading partners want to break into the UK market, they should expect to meet those standards. The manifesto I stood on was clear that in all trade negotiations, our high environmental protection, animal welfare and food standards will not be compromised. The Government will stand firm in trade negotiations to ensure any deals live up to the values of our farmers and consumers.

I am pleased that all food coming into this country will be required to meet existing import requirements. I know that at the end of the transition period the Withdrawal Act will convert all EU standards into domestic law. This includes a ban on using artificial growth hormones in both domestic and imported products and nothing apart from potable water may be used to clean chicken carcasses. Any changes to these standards would have to come before Parliament.

The Government has committed to a serious and rapid examination of what could be done through labelling in the UK market to promote high standards and high welfare goods. Any scheme could not be devised until we have completed the transition period and would need to recognise World Trade Organisation (WTO) obligations.

Amendments to the Agriculture Bill

The Government needs the freedom to negotiate trade deals on a country by country and case by case basis. As such, a blanket ban on imports that do not meet the UK's standards would undermine this.

Although amendments 11, 12, 16, 16b & 17 made to the Agriculture Bill in the House of Lords were designed to protect farmers, they would actually cause immense harm to British farmers. Being unable to secure free trade deals would not only stop imports coming into the UK, it would also mean that it would be harder for our farmers to export to other countries, thereby depriving them of the huge opportunities provided by free trade.

Insisting, as the Lords Amendment 16 and 16b would, that we only trade with countries who meet our high production standards and that can demonstrate equivalence across a range of policy areas

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Rt Hon Alok Sharma, MP for Reading West

would create a vast set of new conditions that our trading partners must meet – imposing a massive new barrier to trade. This goes well beyond existing EU rules and our current standards. This would make it virtually impossible for the Government to strike a free trade deal with any country, including countries we currently trade with.

Such a situation would be deeply damaging for the UK economy. Free trade with other countries will be a central part of driving our recovery as we bounce back from the pandemic. The proposed amendments would wreck any chance of new free trade deals and would ultimately lead to job losses and lower living standards.

It is a long-established principle that more developed countries do not impose their own standards on less developed countries when it comes to trade. As such, not only will amendments 12 and 16 inflict harm on some of the world's poorest people, it would send a message to the rest of the world that we do not share their values in relation to helping poorer countries to develop and prosper.

Regarding amendment 18 and 18b made to the Agriculture Bill, relating to the composition and status of the Trade and Agriculture Commission, I know my Ministerial colleagues are always considering how best to strengthen the machinery of government to ensure effective decision-making. I am glad that the Government is putting the Trade and Agriculture Commission on a statutory footing and confirming that the body will produce a report, to be laid in Parliament, on the impact on animal welfare and agriculture arising from each new free trade deal.

Trade and Agriculture Commission

I welcome that the Government is establishing a Trade and Agriculture Commission - a move supported by the National Farmers' Unions in England, Scotland and Wales, as well as Northern Ireland's Ulster Farmers' Union.

The Commission will ensure close engagement with the agriculture industry to help inform, shape and guide agricultural trade policy. It will be independently chaired by food safety expert Tim Smith, a former Chief Executive of the Food Standards Agency. Within a fixed term the Commission will consider trade policies that the Government should adopt to secure opportunities for UK farmers, producers and exporters. The Commission will also ensure the agriculture sector remains competitive and that animal welfare and environmental standards in food production are not undermined. When its work is concluded the Commission will produce a report, which will be presented to Parliament by the Department for International Trade.

Food production standards and future trade deals

I have already set out the Government's position about maintaining British food production standards ahead of any future trade deals. Please see letter 235 on the letters section on my website.

Thank you again for taking the time to contact me.

Yours sincerely,



Alok Sharma MP

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