

The Irish border issue

Eurosceptics do not see there is a problem with the land border between the Republic of Ireland and the UK. As the government has made clear, the UK will not be imposing new barriers or complex new checks at the border once we leave.

The present border is already a complex border. It is a VAT border and Excise border. Trucks do not have to wait at the border while someone in a kiosk works out the VAT owing. It is all done electronically away from the border. States are good at knocking tax off business accounts without needing to collect fivers when the truck arrives. It is a currency border. Again the currency calculations and exchanges occur well away from the transit point. It is an anti terrorist border, which works by mutual co-operation on both sides. The day after we leave arrangements to control smuggling and to intercept criminals will be the same as today. The UK and the Republic of Ireland have confirmed that the long standing Travel Area between our two countries will continue, avoiding the need for extra checks on people crossing.

The UK will continue to inspect food products after we leave as before. The EU authorities will presumably continue to check and certify the products they are sending for export without needing a check at their border, and the UK will continue to regulate wholesalers and retailers with inspections and spot checks on their facilities and product as required, all away from the border. UK retailers will continue to be under a legal duty of care to ensure anything they import from the EU is safe food.

So why is there an issue? The Republic of Ireland and the EU say there may be an issue because they are concerned about "the integrity of the single market". It reminds us that the single market was never a free trade area, but a heavily protected system ring fenced with tariffs and dependent on detailed product specification and regulation. Anyone inside the EU or outside the EU has to comply with all aspects of the rules and tax requirements in order to sell into this market. Once out the UK as other third countries like the USA and China will have to comply with all the rules on goods exported to the EU, just as we do today. The difference will be that we can adopt different standards if we wish to for other overseas markets and for our domestic market. We may design better ones or we may need to adopt different standards for export product elsewhere. More importantly we will no longer be expected to pay large sums for the privilege of being inside this single market and we will be free to cut tariffs to buy cheaper goods from non EU countries if we wish.

The issue of the Irish border is therefore one for the EU, not for the UK. The question to them is what new checks if any will they impose on the Republic of Ireland border on their exports to the UK and their imports from the UK? Any checks they wish to impose on UK exports will of course have to be proportionate and appropriate under WTO rules. They also cannot impose checks against UK exports that they do not impose against exports from

anywhere else in the world. The EU says it understands the history of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. That means they will not wish to impose new barriers and difficult checks at the border. There are many crossing points, and like all such land borders smuggling is possible over fields and farms as well as along rural roads. There is smuggling today and there will be smuggling after Brexit. Authorities on both sides of the border have an interest in controlling and prosecuting smugglers, and do so today by intelligence led co-operation. The same is the best answer once the UK has left the EU.

The border issue is of course mainly a political issue designed to make it difficult or impossible for the UK to leave the single market and customs union. It only achieves this end if the UK accepts the faulty premise, that new barriers are needed at the border if we just leave. The UK government has stated clearly it does not think that. The EU also likes to claim there is no technology answer to this conundrum. They should remind themselves that their borders today work with much help from electronic manifests, off border settlement of taxes and duties, a low number of sampling checks at borders, checks at the factory or farm originating the product or at the wholesaler or retailer receiving the product, TIR transport systems and the rest. Computers and the internet offer plenty of ways of having smooth borders, reflected in the Facilitation of Trade rules of the WTO. The UK imports quite easily from non EU sources today despite EU rules and controls affecting such imports.