

Let's have higher animal welfare standards

One of my many disappointments with our membership of the EU was the EU's attitude towards animal welfare.

As an opponent of bull fighting, I thought it bad that farmland and farmers involved in rearing bulls for fighting attract payments under the CAP, even though they can claim there is no direct subsidy for bullfighting itself.

As a lover of wild birds, I thought it unfortunate that the so called Wild Birds conservation Directive was also a hunting of wild birds directive, allowing countries to permit hunting a wide range of species that goes well beyond the permitted species like gamebirds allowed in the UK.

As someone concerned about standards of farm rearing, I thought the EU unduly slow in responding to UK pressure to improve standards over veal crates and sow tethers. It has still left us with relatively low standards.

Worse still for the animals, the UK banned veal crates in 1990 but the EU failed to do until 16 years later. We banned sow tethers in 1998, with the EU resisting until 2013, 15 years later. These differences led to relative gains in market share serving price conscious customers to the continental industry at the expense of our farmers.

In the very vexed area of chicken breeding, the EU was again reluctant to improve the cage space for battery hens. It took until 2012 to get a ban on the worst conditions.

I find the argument over chlorine washes misleading. The EU allows chlorine washes for items like bagged salad, which I never get complaints about, yet I get complaints about alleged chlorine washes for US chicken. Our water system relies on chlorine washes for hygiene in the pipe network, and medics advise that small traces of chlorine are not harmful.

I am strongly in favour of proper labelling and explanations of how food is produced. It will always be the case that those with higher incomes will be able to afford the best welfare standards. There does need to be a minimum standard. The question we should ask is can we raise that standard a bit as we leave the EU, without making affected foods unrealistically expensive? I think we can. Those who think the EU guarantees high standards should look at this dreadful history of opposition to and delay of better standards to grab commercial advantage. All the time we were in the single market we have had years of being forced to take meat and eggs produced in cruel conditions we had banned at home.

A new trade vision for the UK

I find some of the media and email arguments I read and hear about our trade future bizarre. Remain politicians and spin doctors are still peddling the lie that we cannot live with any changes to our current tariff free trade arrangements with the EU, whilst we must not enter into a tariff free Agreement with the USA.

There has always been a central lie behind the Remain position on trade, based on the so called gravity model. This states that trade with near neighbours is both more likely and more important than trade with countries further away. The model's economic forecasts are weighted so EU trade matters and rest of the world trade doesn't, for no particularly good reason.

In recent years our single biggest national trading partner is the USA, not Germany or France. 3000 miles has beaten a few hundred miles of distance. Our trade with China on the other side of the world has grown far more quickly than our trade with the low countries, near by. This is despite facing tariffs on our non EU trade and no tariffs on our EU trade. How much more could we trade with the TPP and the USA on a tariff free basis?

The dislike of opening a Free Trade Agreement with the USA predates President Trump but has been intensified by Remain's distaste for the present incumbent of the White House. There has been an orchestrated attempt to disrupt good relations between our two countries, and to vilify US food. The people who do so have often flown across the Atlantic and enjoyed US meals in hotels and restaurants without a murmur then about what they are eating other than to sometimes praise it and their hosts.

In a few posts I am going to explore some of these issues one more time. Today I wish to stress four obvious truths from the figures concerning our trading patterns in recent years.

1. Our trade has grown more quickly with the rest of the world than with the EU in recent years, despite EU barriers and tariffs and despite distance. Non EU trade is now the majority of our trade.
 2. Our non EU trade shows you can have a substantial and profitable trade without a special FTA in place. FTAs are helpful but not essential to trade, expanding it a bit.
 3. If you enter a Free Trade Agreement with another country you do not have to obey their law codes, and you do not have to buy products they make which you do not want or like.
 4. Once we are fully out of the EU we will decide on our animal welfare and food growing standards.
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Some questions on the virus

We are waiting for the science to catch up with events. It is clearly not easy understanding and combatting a new virus in a hurry, when crucial information has to come from patients suffering from the disease willing to submit to various treatments to see what happens. We have, however, had all too many cases and deaths, so soon perhaps more knowledge will be forthcoming.

We need to know, for example, whether any of the proposed existing licenced medicines for other complaints can help alleviate symptoms, ease severity or reduce the time the illness lasts. The UK has now approved remdesivir, but there are other remedies taken on their own or with others that might help. We need an update.

There is the question of the Oxford/Astra Zeneca vaccine. This is going into production before the results of clinical trials. We are told there may be results early autumn. There are also other vaccine hopes around the world.

The UK has now been testing random samples to represent the population as a whole to find out infection rates. This should enable a more accurate R or transmission rate to be calculated. When will we see proper graphs and charts of these numbers with a better evidence base for R? This could be helpful in making decisions about the pace of further easing, which is much needed for the sake of livelihoods.

What is the expert view on why the new case rate and death rate has stayed as high as it has during a strong lock down? Shouldn't they have subsided more. How was the virus being transmitted during this period? Can we now use track and test to head off further localised outbreaks?

Are we now in the position where too many deaths are being attributed to CV 19 when it is not even known whether some had the disease or not, or when they also had other serious conditions that might have been the true cause? How comparable are our figures with other countries, that follow different criteria for reporting deaths?

Much now rests on making a success of test and trace. That requires the willing collaboration of the public, taking tests if and when they develop covid like symptoms they do not normally suffer. It needs the rest to agree to self isolate if they have been in close contact with someone who has the disease.

We cannot keep the whole country in lockdown for more months, with just the NHS and a few basics up and running. It was possible to borrow and print the money for a couple of months, but it does not work if you try to do that as a new lifestyle with no limit on the cash .

Hong Kong

The Chinese authorities attempted to introduce a right of appeal of Hong Kong court cases to the mainland, seeking to put HK law more firmly under China's control. This deeply unpopular move sparked many protests in Hong Kong and led to running fights between the police and the protesters. A hapless Chief Executive tried to persuade a split legislature that this was a benign and sensible move, without success.

Grasping the opportunity of the Covid 19 preoccupations of the rest of the world, China has now moved to legislate her supremacy in Beijing, bypassing the Hong Kong legislature. The new law will allow either the Hong Kong police or Chinese officials to determine if someone's democratic protest amounts to treason or sedition. Wanting independence is banned.

Mr Trump has responded strongly to this development. Each year by law the President has to confirm that Hong Kong is still sufficiently independent of China to qualify for the continuing special trade deal it enjoys with the USA. He says he is not willing to do so, given the new incursions on Hong Kong independence. This will mean Hong Kong business will face the same tariffs, bans and penalties as trade from mainland China to the USA does.

The UK is the co signatory of the Treaty with China to establish Hong Kong as part of China under the one country two systems mantle. The two systems were meant to encompass the right of Hong Kong to settle many of its own matters and court cases in return for maintained access and privileges to western markets. What action should the UK take to seek to uphold this Treaty? Is it right to offer UK residence to Hong Kong citizens?

The famous clauses 18 and 19 which provide for Hong Kong judicial and law making independence do also contain a provision allowing the imposition of Chinese national laws when there is a break down in government in Hong Kong.

IAG need to understand the anger about BA job losses

Yesterday in the Commons some MPs were allowed to ask questions of a Transport Minister over the bad news of possible job losses and worse terms and conditions of employment for BA staff who keep a job. All felt the same, that IAG are treating BA employees badly after years of profiting from prime slots at Heathrow and from the successful UK based international travel

business.

The Minister pointed to the deferral of VAT payments, the Covid commercial finance facility and the Job retention or furlough scheme as government help to the industry. She expressed regret about the job losses at BA, Virgin and Easyjet. She told us the Job retention scheme money being used by BA was not “designed for taxpayers to fund the wages of employees only for those companies to put these same staff on notice of redundancy within the furlough period.” She said the government has “set up a restart, recovery and engagement unit to work with the aviation industry on the immediate issues affecting the restart of the sector and its longer term growth and recovery”.

She said she did not have legal powers to remove landing slots from BA nor did she set out any legal means of using leverage from the Job Retention grants. When challenged about the proposed worsening of terms of employment, she said she expected companies to “treat their employees with the social responsibility that one would expect.”

I am following up with a letter to the government asking them to show more urgency over the threats to BA jobs, and asking them to take a tougher stance over IAG's actions. IAG have large cash reserves, will want to run airlines as we recover and has profited a lot in the past from its U.K. investment. So why is it picking on U.K. staff for redundancies?