

Press release: UK and Switzerland sign trade continuity agreement

A trade continuity agreement will see British businesses and consumers benefiting from continued trade with Switzerland after we leave the European Union.

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade, The Rt Hon Dr Liam Fox MP, signed the UK-Switzerland agreement in Bern today (Monday 11th February) with Swiss Federal Councillor Guy Parmelin.

The news has been welcomed by business groups including the British Swiss Chamber of Commerce (BSCC) who say it will help to support jobs and ensure businesses can keep trading without disruption.

The agreement simplifies trade and allows businesses to continue trading freely, without any additional tariffs. It continues the elimination of duties on the vast majority of goods traded between the UK and Switzerland.

Trading on these preferential terms rather than on World Trade Organization terms will deliver significant savings and help to safeguard British jobs.

This will help to further strengthen the trading relationship between the UK and Switzerland, which was worth £32.1 billion in 2017.

The British vehicles sector could avoid up to £8 million a year in tariff charges on their exports that would apply if the agreement wasn't in place, while aluminium exporters could avoid up to £4 million and precious stones and metals exporters could also avoid up to £4 million.

Consumers in the UK will continue to benefit from more choice and lower prices on goods imported from Switzerland, such as clocks, watches, and pharmaceutical products.

International Trade Secretary, The Rt Hon Dr Liam Fox MP said:

Switzerland is one of the most valuable trading partners that we are seeking continuity for, accounting for more than £32 billion worth of trade a year.

This is of huge economic importance to UK businesses so I'm delighted to be here in Bern today, ensuring continuity for 15,000 British exporters. Not only will this help to support jobs throughout the UK but it will also be a solid foundation for us to build an even stronger trading relationship with Switzerland as we leave the EU.

Swiss Federal Councillor Guy Parmelin said:

I am very pleased to have signed this agreement today. It ensures continuity in our trade relations after the United Kingdom leaves the European Union and lays the foundations for our future relations.

Anne-Marie de Weck, President of the British-Swiss Chamber of Commerce said:

The BSCC welcomes the signing of the UK Government's continuity trade agreement with Switzerland.

It is imperative for our members, both British & Swiss businesses, that trade continues. Switzerland is the UK's 7th largest export market, 3rd largest non-EU market, 8th largest foreign direct investor and 10th top destination for UK outward direct investment. It is paramount that the British and Swiss governments have secured the continuation of a huge trading relationship with this agreement.

[Speech: Lord Ahmad Speech at the Governing Council of the Community of Democracies](#)

I am particularly delighted that I am joined by my good friend and colleague from the Cabinet Office, Chloe Smith and I look forward to her intervention. I thank you Chloe for joining us here at the FC0, it is as I said this morning, a very busy time over the road in Westminster – indeed, as Chloe informed me, the Prime Minister is currently on her feet – so the fact that Chloe is here we are extremely grateful.

As said, by Richard, we are joined by Anthony Smith, from the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. Having two Smiths either side of me makes me a bit of a sandwich I suppose – I am the filling in the middle here, having such expertise either side of me.

Of course, we talked earlier this morning about democracy and it does not take a single form; indeed, as I am sure we have heard today from some of the representatives. I am glad that you heard from the Maldives Foreign Minister, who I met earlier, about their journey to democracy. Indeed, one of the areas they are keen to do, is also re-join the Commonwealth, which as the Minister of the Commonwealth I particularly welcome.

But as we embark on these journeys, as I said indeed our own journey in the United Kingdom – the actual speed of change is different and the results may differ. But, one true fact is that every true democracy has at their heart and their interest the people. People make democracies tick; it is not just about, as we have seen, giving people the vote – it is also about the process that goes behind it; in terms of education, it is about being informed, being enabled.

I am sure many of us remember that famous scene of the first election – I certainly do – in South Africa, where people queued for hours, just to cast their vote. I am mindful of the fact that there are places in the world, such as Australia, where my wife grew up and even now as an Australian national, if she doesn't cast her vote, albeit by post, she gets fined – so there are different ways of encouraging participation.

But in essence, it comes back to the idea of people and ensuring people are fully engaged and that we facilitate that engagement.

Providing an open space for debate, the ability to question and challenge – and yes, our democracy is reflective of that. It is often said that the British Parliament is quite adversarial, I mean literally we are opposite each other being challenged. But the fact is, it provides that level of accountability.

As I mentioned this morning, the importance of the freedom of press, sometimes they are critical, quite often they are critical of governments and hold us to the account. But this is part and parcel of the free press which defines a flourishing democracy.

It is no coincidence that where societies enjoy participative democracy, where people are free in an open environment, security and prosperity tend to follow very quickly and are part and parcel what defines that particular country or society.

However, when we look at different comparative democracies there are still those that feel their voices are not heard. This is a challenge we have and Chloe has been very close to that. I remember one of my early days in Parliament, in 2011, looking at the reform of our own electoral system – different electoral systems are perceived as being more fair than the next. So again, democracies can be very different – proportional representation is often said that that way all people are heard; but does that mean that those voices, perhaps who are at the fringes also then gain greater voices in public space – that is a challenge that all democracies face.

Last year, in this respect, the UK held its inaugural, the first ever National Democracy Week. The aim was to increase participation from those most under-represented in this country. Chloe, I'm sure, will talk more to this, and show how the UK is trying to tackle the real challenge of democratic participation; encouraging more people to engage.

For my part, as a Minister of State at the Foreign Office, I can tell you that promoting and strengthening democracy is a key priority, and indeed it

figures as a key part of my work as the Human Rights Minister.

We support a wide range of democracy-building initiatives, just to give you a few examples;

- funding NGOs that increase citizen participation,
- promoting the inclusion of marginalised groups,
- providing legal training for legal professionals around the world,
- promoting freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly
- strengthening political parties and parliaments, and
- supporting free and fair elections.

One of the areas that was discussed, between the Foreign Minister and myself, was the elections that are taking place – the parliamentary elections – that there will be election observers and how we work within different observer bodies to ensure that elections are fair.

However, there are many things that limit democracy. For example, you can have a democracy, but through legislation, through the constitution, certain communities are marginalised – they are not allowed to participate. Internet shutdowns – we have seen this recently as well as a means to clamp down on challenge to the government. Out-dated restrictions on women – I mentioned before that 100 years ago women did not have the right to the vote here. But the fact is that there are still places around the world that restrict a woman's ability to go out and simply cast her vote and chose her elected representative. And indeed women's participation in parliament themselves.

We often talk of countries where there have been challenges and conflicts, but I always see things in a very positive light, and as Minister for the Commonwealth I have been current for example in Rwanda – and whilst challenges remain, if you look at the Rwandan parliament, I think it is about 66% of the Rwandan parliament are now women. So representative democracy, in its truest sense, does take place, and sometimes it is not by the oldest democracy, it is by those who are seeking to effect change in a different way. This goes back to my earlier point about how democracies take route and the speed in which they take route.

The UK Government also funds the Westminster Foundation for Democracy – and I am delighted to be joined by Anthony and he will certainly explain more about what they are doing to encourage greater levels of democracy amongst marginalised groups; a greater level of democratic participation amongst women and of course young people. But first, before asking Anthony to give his contribution – as I said I am delighted to be joined her on the panel by Chloe Smith. Chloe and I knew each other before we both came into parliament. So, I am delighted to have her here as both a friend, but also in her role as Minister for the Constitution – Chloe over to you.

Press release: Improved access to thousands more world class school places

Disadvantaged pupils will have access to even more good or outstanding school places as the Government invests another £50 million to make sure as many children as possible benefit from world class education.

Launching the second round of the [Selective Schools Expansion Fund](#) today (11 February), the Department for Education will be making money available for grammar schools to create additional places, but only if they demonstrate how they will attract more disadvantaged pupils and work with other schools in their area to raise standards locally.

Today's launch marks the second round of funding available for this programme, following the announcement of the 16 schools that were successful in bidding for the first round. All those schools committed to a range of measures to improve access for disadvantaged pupils, and the Department for Education has also today published details of those commitments.

All schools successful in the first round of the fund were rated as Outstanding, with 98% of grammar schools rated either Good or Outstanding overall. Grammar schools are also popular with parents, with around 15 pupils choosing a selective school as their first preference for every 10 selective places offered. Today's announcement builds on the 825,000 new school places created since 2010 and the one million this Government is on course to create by 2020.

School Standards Minister, Nick Gibb, said:

Selective schools are some of the highest performing schools in the country and so it's right that more pupils should have the opportunity to benefit from the world class education they provide. It's also right that access to those places should be fair to pupils from all backgrounds, which is why selective schools must demonstrate how they are going to admit more pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, if they are going to expand.

It is also a requirement that selective schools work with other schools in their area. Whether through a multi academy trust or an informal partnership, we want to see more selective schools using their expertise to improve opportunities for a wider group of young people.

All schools that bid to expand must submit a Fair Access and Partnership Plan, setting out how they will improve access for disadvantaged pupils. Today, the department is publishing the plans of those schools that were

successful in round one, making clear the extent of the work that will be undertaken to make sure as many young people as possible, regardless of their background, can benefit from a place at an Outstanding school.

The nature of this work is wide ranging, for example Chelmsford County High School will set up help desks in partner primary schools to assist parents registering children for the entrance test, while sixth form students at Queen Mary's High School – along with a number of others – will tutor pupil premium children in literacy and numeracy to support them ahead of the entrance test.

Chief Executive of the Grammar School Heads Association Jim Skinner said:

We are delighted that further selective schools are being given the opportunity to expand. The number of pupils reaching secondary age means that it makes absolute sense that, just like other good and outstanding schools, they are able to expand.

The work we are doing with the Department for Education through our Memorandum of Understanding, is proving most valuable in extending the initiatives that member schools have undertaken in recent years, to increase access for disadvantaged pupils and support other schools in raising standards for all children. Along with the Selective School Expansion Fund, this work is making an important contribution to ensuring more children receive the high quality education that is right for them.

The window for applications to the second round of the Selective Schools Expansion Fund will be open for ten weeks until 23 April.

[News story: HMRC awards new logistics contract to support customs compliance](#)

Following a full procurement exercise, logistics firm Wincanton will work in partnership with HMRC and Border Force, providing logistics.

HMRC and Border Force undertake targeted checks inland, which help prevent mis-declared goods from flowing into the country. Carrying out these checks inland is a proportionate measure to avoid congestion at ports. The overwhelming majority of imports into the UK are not required to go through inland pre-clearance.

HMRC has moved its inland pre-clearance operations from previous sites at Heathrow and Bicester to the new purpose-equipped sites at Hayes and Milton

Keynes.

The new locations were chosen to balance:

- routes to ports for consignments
- cost, quality and facilities of sites
- availability of suitable premises

HMRC has worked closely with Border Force and external estate professionals to determine the appropriate sites within these criteria.

This is part of HMRC's wider, ongoing approach to tackle tax avoidance, evasion and fraud at all levels to ensure everyone pays the right tax at the right time.

For the 5-year term, the contract value is estimated to be £71 million. The contract award decision will be published on the [Contracts Finder](#).

[News story: Gavin Williamson sets out vision for defence in Global Britain](#)

Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson has outlined the global role of the UK's Armed Forces and defence industry after leaving the European Union and beyond in a speech at RUSI today.

The Defence Secretary acknowledged that the UK faces a world of competing powers, hostile states and stateless ideologies, who are happy to operate in a 'grey zone' between war and peace. He claimed it is crucial that Britain's Armed Forces and defence infrastructure are ready to meet these challenges and do not stand still as the world moves forward, making a raft of announcements to support that goal.

Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

The UK is a global power with truly global interests. A nation with the fifth biggest economy on the planet. A nation with the world's fifth biggest Defence budget and the second largest Defence exporter. And since the new Global Great Game will be played on a global playing field, we must be prepared to compete for our interests and our values far, far from home.

New strategic capacity

To support this aspiration, the Defence Secretary announced new strategic assets that will allow Britain to meet the global challenges the future might

hold.

Two new Littoral Strike Groups are to be created. Complete with escorts, support vessels and helicopters, one would be based to the East of Suez in the Indo-Pacific and one based to the West of Suez in the Mediterranean, Atlantic and Baltic.

To compliment these groups, there will be a Warfighting Division with troops able to deploy from our bases at home and in Germany. This will all ensure we have a global force, capable of deploying around the world in a matter of days.

Using our world class assets

This ability to remain a global force and to protect the UK at home and abroad depends not only on personnel but also the equipment they rely on. The Defence Secretary announced that HMS Queen Elizabeth's first operational mission will include the Mediterranean, Middle East and the Pacific. She will have British and American F35s embedded in her air wing, enhancing the reach and lethality of our forces.

Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson today announced the first operational mission of HMS Queen Elizabeth. Crown Copyright.

Increasing our air power

The RAF will also grow the number of Typhoon squadrons from five to seven – equipping them with world leading radar and upgraded deep strike Storm Shadow cruise missiles. This is vital following the recent retirement of the Tornado jet, proving that the UK is still committed to defending ourselves and our allies across the world.

Embracing new technology, the Defence Secretary also committed to use the Transformation Fund to develop swarm squadrons of network enabled drones capable of confusing the enemy and overwhelming their air defences.

The Defence Secretary concluded by highlighting that Britain has always been an outward looking nation. Faced with our adversaries upping their spending and investing in technology, the Armed Forces must respond by strengthening our global presence, as well as enhancing our lethality and increasing our mass.

The full speech is available [here](#).