

Farms Not Factories Responds to Anthony Browne MP

Anthony Browne is the Conservative MP for South Cambridgeshire, and also Chairman of the All Party Parliamentary Group on the Environment

AB Would you support a law that could ban imports of tea, coffee and bananas into the UK, devastating many of the world's poorest economies – and people?

FNF We don't have legislation that stipulates laws in how to produce bananas and coffee because these are products that we can't produce in the UK. We want to prevent food coming into this country below our standards because these imports undercut UK products. Food that we can't produce here must not be made with chemical pesticides that are banned in the UK.

AB Or that effectively bans food imports from developed nations which have a trade deal with us – but allows them from those that don't? No, I didn't think so.

FNF Yes. We want imports to be produced with equivalent standards of production. It is beneficial for all countries to grow food without the chemicals, antibiotics, GM etc that have been deemed toxic by UK and often EU scientists. Most often these imported products come from [western owned companies](#) in third world countries. They are poisoning local people and their environment. So by only importing food that is scientifically not deemed toxic would ensure that they raised their standards to the benefit of local people's health, the health of their water and environment and health of those who consume the food.

AB But that would be the impact of last week's House of Lords well-intentioned but ill thought-out amendment to the Agriculture Bill, coming to the Commons tomorrow, which insists that agricultural imports under any trade deal would have to be produced to the UK's environmental protection, animal welfare, food safety and plant health standards.

FNF Those standards were promised in the Tory manifesto.

AB Making sure we don't allow trade deals to undermine our environmental and animal welfare standards is an issue I passionately support, to the extent I made it the thrust of my maiden speech. I have been environment correspondent of two national newspapers, and am chair of the APPG on the Environment.

FNF well why not put these promises into law?

AB I have a rural constituency, and like most MPs, my inbox is flooded with demands – many prompted by Jamie Oliver's campaigners –

FNF they are from farmers and consumers who don't trust your promises if you don't put it in law.

AB The Conservative Manifesto is also committed to ensuring trade deals don't undermine our animal welfare, food safety and environmental standards. I know that the overwhelming majority of my colleagues support this aim. The amendment sounds entirely reasonable, but

its consequences could be utterly unreasonable. It is based on very solid principles which we can all support – but simply legislating for good principles rarely makes for good law.

FNF That might be the attitude of those who want to undermine laws to get access to markets that otherwise don't want their substandard products.

AB Even its supporters should accept from the outset that this law is not a preservation of our current standards on imports, but a dramatic raising of them. It creates a potentially vast set of new conditions, which do not exist under any existing EU or UK agreement.

FNF It is important to understand that many people voted Brexit to ensure that we can take back control of our market and that includes saying not to the substandard food that came in from other countries including the EU. As Neil Parish said during the Commons debate, we lost half of our sow herd when we banned the sow gestation crate in 2003 as the EU didn't ban it (and then only partially) in 2013,

AB It would be extremely unlikely that trading partners would agree to all requirements; in some cases, it might not even be possible for them to do so.

FNF Is this admitting that you will sacrifice our farmers high standards if it gets you a deal?

AB The EU is instinctively protectionist, but even it does not require that all imports have to precisely meet our environmental and animal welfare standards. Do campaigners think EU standards are unacceptably low?

FNF Yes, we have better standards than the EU because the British people have demanded it from years of campaigning. We have gradually seen them eroded as the neoliberal agenda has seen the likes of Smithfield Food, the biggest pork producer in the world, now owned by China, to come to Poland thanks to a \$100 million loan from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). Because of this constant competition with economies of scale from vast pig factories across the EU, our EU and UK farms are now animal factories that have appalling standards. Many people are concerned that post a trade deal with the US, if we want to improve our standards, the Interstate Dispute Mechanism (ISDM) section of free trade agreements, set up a kangaroo court where companies can sue the UK for their potential loss of profits under laws demanding higher standards.

AB We import bananas from many countries including the Dominican Republic, Belize and Cameroon. We import coffee from Indonesia, Ghana and Vietnam and black tea from Kenya. We do all this under existing (EU) rules.

AB But this amendment would require all these countries to have processes in place to show that they meet thousands of pages of UK domestic environmental and animal welfare legislation.

FNF Animal welfare for coffee and bananas?

AB The cost would be prohibitive and also unnecessary: I can tell you for free that they do not meet the carbon emission targets of the Climate Change Act that are now UK law. If we pass this amendment, pretty much all food imports would be banned from pretty much all developing countries if we signed a trade deal with them.

FNF To recap - are you saying that trade deals should have no standards in order to help poorer countries? Trade deals should be framed as a way to improve standards across the world.

AB Developed nations can better afford to provide the evidence that they meet UK standards, but many of them are seriously inappropriate. Our geography and climate mean that we need strict legal controls on nitrate concentration in soils...

FNF due to extreme levels of nitrate pollution from factory farms effluent and over stocking on pastures.

AB ...which are inappropriate for other countries.

FNF Are you saying that it is OK to exceed safe nitrate concentrations in soils in other countries? They also have undulating hills that when it rains wash the excessive nitrate from excess chemical fertilizer or excess manure from giant animal factories into the water courses.

AB We have laws (to protect nesting birds) on what time of year farmers are allowed to cut hedges, which would be completely wrong-headed to impose on producers with different eco-systems.

FNF These laws were followed by the EU, there is no reason why we can't ensure we don't import food from any country that has decimated habitats. Not least beef and livestock feed from the Amazon and Cerada forests in Argentina. California has rules that prohibit imports that are below their standards so there is no reason why we can't do the same.

AB Campaigners would take cases to court to decide what imports are allowed. We were the first major economy in the world to legislate for Net Zero by 2050. Do we ban all agricultural imports from countries without those legal targets?

FNF To level the playing field, you have a choice, either ban agricultural products that don't meet our net zero aims or include these imported co2 impacts into our net zero by 2050 calculations?

AB There is a contradiction between us wanting to be world-leading on environmental standards, and then insisting we will only trade with those who have the same standards.

FNF Your Tory gov has promised in its manifesto that we won't import products that destroy habitats, biodiversity, treat animals badly and that are proved to be unsafe to eat. How are you going to live up to your promises and not allow these products into the country if it is not through a ban that has teeth i.e. law.

AB There is also the bizarre unintended consequence that the amendment only applies to trade where there is a free trade agreement. So we could import coffee from Vietnam if we don't have a trade agreement, but if we do have a trade agreement we would have to ban coffee imports. Our trade deals would become anti-trade deals.

FNF our trade deals would be to ensure that products are of the standards that our scientists have deemed are safe for our health and the health of the soil, water, air and food security.

AB Like the EU, we should be pragmatic. The detail is so complex, we can't tie the hands of our trade negotiators with blunt legislation, but rather we should examine in detail whether we support what they are proposing.

FNF Having legislation would be useful for the negotiators as it is a clear non-negotiable redline that nothing below the standard that our farmers have to follow, can come into the UK. As your government voted not to let politicians scrutinize trade agreements, how can you examine the proposals?

AB That is why the government has agreed with campaigners to set up an independent Trade and Agriculture Commission to advise on how best the UK can seize new export opportunities, while ensuring animal welfare and environmental standards in food production are not undermined. I think there are strong arguments to make this commission permanent to scrutinise future trade deals. If you don't trust the assurances of ministers, Parliament already has the power to reject any trade deal that it does not like.

FNF The Trade and Agriculture Bill commission is concerningly focused on industry and retail and there is not a broad representation. No representation for British Vets, no animal welfare charities or NGO voices such as the RSPCA. Small scale local farmers and their marketing networks have no-one to represent them. Of the 16-member board, nine are representatives from the food industry and retail. This is not broad, it reflects the real priorities of this neo-liberal, free trade government. Shanker Singham, on the board, is an ex listed 'expert' of USA's leading climate denial group - Heartland institute. Singham arranged for members of a US think tank in favour of reducing regulations around chlorinated chicken to meet UK politicians, according to an investigation by Greenpeace's investigative unit [Unearthed](#)."

AB Debate on this issue often ends up focused on the US's chlorinated chicken. But there is already a UK law banning any product other than potable water from being used to decontaminate meat. Whatever is agreed in any trade deal, chlorinated chicken could only be sold in the UK if Parliament passes legislation allowing it. As Sir Humphrey would say: that would be very brave.

FNF The focus is all too often on a few red flags like US chlorinated chicken because the neoliberal politicians can say that you are not going to allow these particular things in while letting the rest of the substandard products get imported below the public radar.

AB The overwhelming weight of political opinion is against us lowering our standards. We need to keep the same high standards on food and agriculture imports as we had in the EU. And that is exactly what the Government is doing.

FNF Well put it into law in the Agriculture Bill. Otherwise, when these issues are not in the public eye, the neoliberals will find experts to say lower the standards are fine for our health, animal welfare and environment. The Americans are not healthy so why would you want to sacrifice our health in exchange for a few UK farmers but mostly big industry, to sell their products that are only cheap cos the true cost hasn't been internalised. One more thing - what do you kids think of your politics??

