

Human Rights and Trade Deals Debate on 3 October 2019

Summary

On 3 October 2019, the House of Lords is due to debate a motion tabled by Lord Harries of Pentregarth (Crossbench) that “this House takes note of the case for ensuring that human rights are respected in any future trade deals with other countries”.

Trade agreements worldwide have increasingly included clauses which require the parties to meet certain conditions on human rights. These may include rights relating to labour conditions, political participation, environmental issues and standards in relation to specific goods.

Currently the EU negotiates trade agreements with non-EU members on behalf of the UK and other EU member states. It has a wide range of agreements in place. They tend to contain a general obligation to uphold human rights; for example, as set out in the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights and/or the European Convention on Human Rights. The UK has supported the EU’s approach. The Labour Party has also supported the inclusion of human rights clauses in trade agreements.

One of the Government’s main objectives in leaving the EU is to enable the UK to pursue an independent trade policy. It has said that this will provide “an opportunity to explore how we can most appropriately use free trade agreements (FTAs) to pursue broader international objectives while recognising the need for a balanced and proportionate approach”. In February 2019, the then Secretary of State for International Trade, Liam Fox, said that the UK was resisting attempts by some countries to reduce the human rights provisions in trade agreements as the UK moved from EU to independent trade agreements. In July 2019, the Minister for the Middle East, Andrew Murrison, discussed whether any future trade agreement with China may or may not include human rights clauses.

In March 2019, the Joint Committee on Human Rights published a report on human rights in international agreements. It said that there was “a strong case for requiring minimum standard processes, practices and clauses to protect and promote human rights in all international agreements”. It called for greater parliamentary scrutiny of trade agreements, and for negotiating teams to have access to human rights expertise. In its response, the Government committed to a more extensive scrutiny process for trade agreements. However, it rejected the call for a standardised approach to human rights in trade agreements, preferring to maintain flexibility.

Not all commentators agree that trade agreements should include human rights clauses. The arguments against them include concerns about protectionism, and/or that they are a way of imposing one country’s values on another. Opponents argue the approach may disadvantage poorer countries for whom greater human rights may be costly to implement. It has also been suggested that trade agreements may not be the best means to address human rights issues, and that the approach is “new, unproven and not well understood”.

Human Rights in Trade Agreements

A trade agreement is a contractual arrangement between states or groups of states concerning their trade relationships.¹ Increasingly, such arrangements include clauses which promote and protect human rights.² This section considers the types of rights which might be covered in trade agreements and the ways agreements might otherwise threaten human rights.

Types of Rights

The Institute for Human Rights and Business has said that modern trade agreements often have clauses which support specific human rights goals. It said that these cover areas such as:³

- adequate labour conditions and protection of labour rights;
- transparency and anti-corruption measures;
- environmental standards;
- guarantees of political participation;
- protection of indigenous and cultural rights; and
- standards with respect to specific commodities whose trade impacts on human rights.

The institute estimated that over 80 percent of all trade agreements signed since 2013 include labour provisions, and that more than 40 percent of agreements since 2000 include anti-corruption and anti-bribery clauses which go beyond World Trade Organization rules.⁴

In 2016, the then United Nations independent expert on the promotion of a democratic and equitable international order, Alfred de Zayas, called for “all future trade agreements to stipulate the primacy of human rights” and for existing treaties to be revised in the same way. He argued that some trade agreements have had a negative impact on human rights, such as rights to:⁵

- self-determination;
- sovereignty over natural wealth and resources, especially of indigenous populations;
- life and health eg when access to generic medicines is impeded;
- work and humane labour conditions;
- access information, including on commercial treaties;
- peaceful assembly and association; and
- public participation.

Current UK Trade Policy

UK as Participant in EU Trade Agreements

Currently, the UK enters into trade agreements with third countries as a member of the EU. Trade policy is designed exclusively by the EU, which legislates on trade matters and negotiates trade agreements with non-EU members on behalf of all EU member states.⁶

The EU has a wide range of trade agreements. According to its website, it has agreements in place with 38 countries and partly in place with 48 countries. 25 countries have agreements pending ratification and a further 21 have agreements being negotiated.⁷

In addition, as a member of the EU, the UK automatically has free trade with the other 27 member states.

EU Approach to Human Rights in Trade Agreements

The EU has stated that its “main goal” in trade policy is to “increase trading opportunities for European countries by removing trade barriers such as tariffs and quotas and by guaranteeing fair competition”.⁸ However, it said that it also uses its trade policy for other purposes, including to promote “human rights, safety standards, respect for the environment and sustainable development”.

The EU’s international trade and cooperation agreements have included human rights clauses since the early 1990s, and such considerations have become increasingly prominent over time.⁹ It said that, in modern form, such clauses share the same basic structure. This includes:¹⁰

- a general obligation to uphold human rights, for example as set out in the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights and/or the European Convention on Human Rights, and to comply with the rule of law;
- some form of monitoring arrangement. This might consist of a committee with members of the parliaments of both Europe and the partner country, and/or it might include civil society groups; and
- an enforcement mechanism. This, for example, might mean that either party can take “appropriate measures”, up to and including suspending the agreement, if the other party violates human rights. In a more recent paper, the European Parliament Research Service (EPRS) has said that the EU has never suspended a trade agreement under this clause. Instead, it prefers to take other steps, such as dialogue and redirecting aid from government projects to civil society.¹¹

The EPRS considered possible improvements to future human rights clauses. One recommendation was to add references to corporate social responsibility (CSR), perhaps based on the United Nations guiding principles on business and human rights.¹² This could, for example, allow the EU to regulate in favour of imports produced by companies which comply with CSR principles.¹³ Another was to establish a permanent and dedicated human rights committee under each agreement.¹⁴ The EPRS drew similar conclusions in a review of the EU-Mexico and EU-Chile trade and association agreements.¹⁵ However, the European Commission rejected the idea of dedicated human rights committees, arguing that they would duplicate other structures already established as part of the agreements.¹⁶

UK Support for EU Approach

The UK has supported the EU approach of considering human rights issues in its trade agreements. In 2016, the Government published an update to its 2013 national action plan to implement the UN guiding principles. It argued that the promotion of human rights was good for businesses and, in relation to trade deals, said the Government would:

Support the EU commitment to consider the possible human rights impacts of free trade agreements [...] and take appropriate steps including through the incorporation of human rights clauses as appropriate.¹⁷

UK Trade Arrangements Post-Brexit

If the UK leaves the EU on the basis of a deal containing the same provisions as the withdrawal agreement, it would continue to operate the EU's trade regime for the implementation period.¹⁸ The implementation period would be used to negotiate the future relationship between the UK and the EU, including on issues relating to trade.¹⁹ During the implementation period the UK would also be able to negotiate, sign and ratify other free trade agreements, but it would not be able to implement them until after the implementation period, unless the remaining EU states agreed.²⁰

If the UK leaves without a deal, trade agreements to which the UK is party as a member of the EU would immediately cease to apply to the UK.²¹

One of the Government's main Brexit objectives is to enable the UK to pursue an independent trade policy.²² Its initial approach is to seek 'trade continuity agreements' with individual countries or trading blocs to replace EU trade agreements after Brexit. As at 4 September 2019, 13 such agreements had been signed and a further 24 were under discussion.²³

In July 2018, the Government launched public consultations on its approach to future free trade agreements (FTAs). The first consultations covered FTAs with the United States, Australia and New Zealand, and whether the UK should accede to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).²⁴ The Government published summaries of responses to these consultations in July 2019. The summaries suggested that respondents showed support for:²⁵

- reducing tariffs with key markets and removing wider barriers to trade;
- creating opportunities to cut red tape;
- advancing digital trade;
- removing barriers for the services sector; and
- increasing mutual recognition of qualifications and allowing greater movement of skilled workers.

Human Rights in UK Trade Agreements Post-Brexit

The Government has stated that being able to set its own trade policy post-Brexit will allow it to promote its objectives in areas such as foreign policy and human rights. In evidence to the Joint Committee on Human Rights, it said:

The UK's exit from the EU provides us with an opportunity to explore how we can most appropriately use free trade agreements to pursue broader international objectives while recognising the need for a balanced and proportionate approach. The Government is exploring all options in the design of future trade and investment agreements, including relevant human rights provisions within these.²⁶

In its summaries of responses to the consultations on future FTAs (referred to in the previous section) the Government noted that some respondents expressed concerns about the potential impact of a future UK-US FTA on "the protection of human rights and civil liberties".²⁷ Specific concerns included ensuring a "level playing field where the protection of rights and freedoms, including workers' rights, were provided for". Other respondents called for gender and racial equality provisions in the UK-US

FTA, in light of “the perceived reduction of rights that transgender people have in the US as compared to the UK”.²⁸

The Government has not yet published a response to the consultations. However, in July 2019 it said that it was “laying the ground for these negotiations including through informal discussions with key trading partners”. It stated that “before negotiations start, we will publish our own negotiating objectives and scoping assessment and will ensure that Parliament has the opportunity to consider them”.²⁹

On 13 February 2019, the then Secretary of State for International Trade, Liam Fox, said that the UK was resisting attempts by some countries to reduce the human rights provisions in trade agreements as the UK moved from EU to independent trade agreements. He said:

Some countries have said that they did not like some of the human rights elements that were incorporated by the EU and they would like us to drop those in order to roll the agreements over. I am not inclined to do so, because the value we attach to human rights is an important part of who we are as a country.³⁰

The Government has said that in the UK-Israel trade agreement, published in February 2019, the human rights provisions contained in the existing EU-Israel agreement would be rolled over.³¹

A debate in the House of Commons on 22 July 2019 on the ongoing situation in Hong Kong included a discussion on human rights in a possible future trade agreement with China. The Minister for the Middle East, Andrew Murrison, said:

Human rights and trade and prosperity are two sides of the same coin [...] There is nothing to prevent human rights forming part of any agreement that we might have. That is not to say that any agreement would necessarily contain clauses along those lines, but there is nothing to prevent the United Kingdom from insisting, in such an agreement, on particular measures of [that] sort.³²

Opposition’s Policy

The Labour Party has stated its support for including human rights clauses in trade agreements. In its 2017 manifesto, it said:

Labour will build human rights and social justice into trade policy. We will ensure that trade agreements cannot undermine human rights and labour standards.³³

Other Countries’ Approaches

In 2017, the academic Iffat Idris published a brief survey of human rights and governance provisions in trade agreements in the US, Canada, Chile and a selection of other countries (excluding the EU). Her key findings included that:³⁴

- the US was a “leader in promoting labour rights, transparency, due process and anti-corruption in trade agreements”, but that it had “steered clear of promoting universal human rights”;
- Canada had tended to follow the US by focusing on specific rights, including labour rights, rather than universal human rights; and

- Chile had “no discernible pattern of trend with regard to labour rights provisions in its trade agreements”.

Idris suggested that other countries, such as New Zealand, Australia and Japan, showed a “general lack of stress on governance/human rights provisions”, although labour rights were the most commonly included.

Issues Around Human Rights Provisions in Trade Agreements

Joint Committee on Human Rights Report

In March 2019, the Joint Committee on Human Rights published a report on human rights in international agreements. It said that there was a “strong case for requiring minimum standard processes, practices and clauses to protect and promote human rights in all international agreements”.³⁵

It noted that the UK’s withdrawal from the EU meant that there would be greater domestic scrutiny of many international agreements previously negotiated at an EU level. In this context it concluded:

The Government needs to take action to ensure adequate consideration of human rights issues while international agreements are being negotiated. It needs to ensure negotiating teams have access to human rights expertise, and that there is clear information about human rights implications of such agreements in the internal sign off process. It should also ensure that future agreements contain clauses which protect human rights. They should include suspension clauses (which allow an agreement to be suspended if human rights are not adhered to) and exemption clauses (which prevent agreements being used to prevent state parties taking measures to protect or promote public morals, including human rights) as a matter of course [...] It should be routine for all UK international agreements to contain such provisions.³⁶

The committee also recommended that Parliament’s role be strengthened. It said that the current system for non-EU agreements only allows scrutiny after the event, and described this as “inadequate”. It called for more information to be provided to Parliament earlier in the process. The committee suggested that the Government should be required to inform Parliament of all international agreements that it intends to negotiate, including any relevant human rights issues. It recommended a more detailed human rights analysis once there was a draft text of a treaty, and regular reports on human rights compliance for treaties which had come into force. The committee also suggested that its own remit should be broadened to include human rights relating to the UK’s international obligations.³⁷

These general recommendations covered international agreements of all types. Considering trade agreements specifically, the committee said that such agreements “have the potential both to promote and to undermine human rights and there is strong evidence that these agreements require a specific human rights focus”.³⁸

The committee discussed whether it was desirable to have standard form human rights clauses for all international agreements. It reported evidence that this might help to protect the rights of, for example, children and disabled people. However, it also noted that human rights concerns might be different in different countries and therefore might be better addressed with specifically tailored clauses. It recommended a combination of standard and specific clauses.³⁹

The committee highlighted the Investor-State Dispute Settlement (ISDS) system as a “particular area of concern”.⁴⁰ ISDS mechanisms in trade agreements allow investors to sue host states for actions which breach standards in those agreements and which harm their profits.⁴¹ However, the Trade Justice Movement argued that the current structure of ISDSs means that a state could be sued for enacting legislation to protect human rights. The committee concluded that there was “increasing evidence” that ISDSs did in fact discourage states from introducing regulatory measures to protect human rights, labour rights and health. It recommended that “investor rights must not be privileged over human rights” and that any system for dispute settlement should be “fair, accessible and cost-efficient”.

Considering whether the UK alone might have lower negotiating leverage than the EU as a whole, the committee argued that it might and that this could lead to reduced human rights protections. It said:

One study of EU human rights clauses concluded that any results they produce in relation to third countries is restricted to countries over which the EU holds substantial economic leverage [...] Instead of speaking on behalf of a potential market of more than 500 million consumers, the UK Government now speaks on behalf of a market of 65 million. This diminishes the UK’s bargaining power. Claims that this bargaining power will be used to protect and promote human rights rather than commercial interests should be scrutinised very carefully.⁴²

Government’s Response

The Government’s response to the committee’s report was published in May 2019.⁴³

Considering parliamentary scrutiny of treaties, it noted that the framework set out under the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 (CRaG) had been carefully designed to balance oversight and the ability of the negotiator to secure the best possible deal.⁴⁴ Under this framework, it said the appropriate point to provide information would be when the terms of the treaty were agreed and it was laid before Parliament.

However, in relation to trade agreements the Government set out a more extensive scrutiny process, recognising that Parliament would have a “strong interest”. It repeated the approach set out in a February 2019 paper on the processes which would be adopted in making future free trade agreements.⁴⁵ These included:⁴⁶

- publishing an “outline approach” at the start of negotiations, to include the negotiating objectives and the potential economic impact of the agreement. Parliament would have a role in scrutinising these documents;
- publishing a “round report” following each substantive round of negotiations, providing an outline of talks by policy area;
- establishing a “close relationship with a specific parliamentary committee in each House”, to assist scrutiny of FTAs “throughout the process”. This committee could have access to sensitive information and could receive private briefings from negotiating teams. Once an agreement had been reached it would publish a report which would inform the CRaG procedure. The committee may be an existing or a new one;
- formalising the consultation arrangements with the devolved administrations. The paper said that treaties were a reserved matter for the UK Parliament, but that “the devolved governments have a strong and legitimate interest”; and
- publishing an explanatory memorandum and full impact assessment alongside each final treaty text when laid before Parliament.

In relation to the final point, the Government said that it had previously committed to a discussion of “any significant human rights implications” in each explanatory memorandum.⁴⁷ However, it noted that the contents of this discussion had not been defined and that, in practice, “meaningful information” had not been supplied. It proposed to update the template for explanatory memoranda to ensure that the human rights implications of all treaties were set out.

The Government also agreed that the remit of the Joint Committee on Human Rights should include consideration of the Government’s international human rights obligations.⁴⁸

In response to the committee’s request for standard clauses on human rights, the Government rejected an “overly rigid and standardised approach”. It stated that it was “considering all options that maintain its commitment to promoting UK values while ensuring that there is flexibility to pursue the UK’s trade objectives”.⁴⁹

In relation to ISDS mechanisms, the Government said that it was not aware of any claims made by UK investors that have “led directly to or contributed towards a negative impact on human rights”. It stated that it supported recent reforms to ISDS which seek to improve ethical standards and transparency in arbitration processes.⁵⁰

Arguments Against Including Human Rights Clauses in Trade Agreements

Not all commentators agree that trade agreements should include human rights clauses. Writing for the World Trade Organization, academic Susan Aaronson and World Bank economist Jean-Pierre Chauffour summarised the arguments against. These included:⁵¹

- governments may use trade agreements to impose their own values or norms on other countries, “with a view to globalising their social policies or regulatory approach”;
- introducing human rights provisions into trade agreements is a form of protectionism (ie anti-free trade policies) in disguise;
- trade agreements are not the optimum means to address human rights issues;
- human rights provisions are expensive for developing countries to implement. This may mean that scarce resources in those countries are not available for other projects, and/or that those countries become more disadvantaged in trade terms; and
- more generally, the combining of trade and human rights is “new, unproven and not well understood”. The authors suggested further analysis into whether the approach is “effective and enduring”.

A research paper for the international affairs policy institute Chatham House reached a similar conclusion. It argued that assessments of including human rights clauses in trade agreements have:

Struggled to provide compelling analyses of the relationships between trade agreements and the enjoyment of different human rights, let alone a clear roadmap for policymakers and trade negotiators as to what should be done.⁵²

Further Information

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