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### Black is white, Obama admin tells Asia

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*By Alan Beattie, FT World Trade Editor*

Hoping to deflect anger during Barack Obama's tour of Asia, his people have been out peddling the familiar line that, in effect, [protectionism is not protectionism](#). In other news: war is peace, cats reject "feline" tag and Oceania has always been at war with Eurasia.

Good luck convincing Asia with that one. If legality constitutes a defence against the label of protectionism, then [Smoot-Hawley](#) wasn't protectionism, and nor was the 1721 Calico Act which made it a criminal offence to import cotton cloth into England, nor the contemporary French equivalent that made textile smuggling a capital offence. (No, really.)

My friend Daniel Davies makes a good point [here](#) that all sorts of policies have been chucked into the bag marked "protectionism" without due care and attention, but surely raising tariffs - and in the case of Mr Obama's famous [Chinese tyres decision](#), not even in response to illicit pricing or subsidies - has got to count. At least, that is what the G20 implied when it promised in Washington last November to refrain from new protectionist actions, including raising tariffs within agreed legal limits.

All in all, I prefer the honesty of the likes of Senator Sherrod Brown of Ohio, who has the guts to [argue for the rehabilitation](#) of the word rather than pretending it isn't what it is. (This is not an official FT endorsement of Senator Brown's views on trade, I should add, before the Cato Institute orders airstrikes on our HQ.)

Otherwise we just end up with the hypocrisy of one of those [irregular verbs](#): I take entirely legitimate measures to safeguard the future of my vital industries; you raise tariffs; he is a protectionist.

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