

Food Fearmongering Should Not Thwart US-UK Trade Deal

Marian Tupy

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About a decade ago, I flew to Oslo at the invitation of Norway's center-right party called Høyre. Back then, Høyre was in opposition, although today it forms a part of Norway's governing coalition. Its head, Erna Solberg, whom I met on the trip, is the country's prime minister. During my stay in the country I gave a couple of talks on trade protectionism, advising the Norwegians to keep the millions of krone they send to Africa as foreign aid (where it gets promptly stolen by local kleptocrats) and open their borders to African agricultural exports instead.

"Norway," some people objected, "has stringent food safety standards and Norwegians are used to high quality products." This, I pointed out, does not necessarily amount to much. At the time of my trip, the country was suffering from a domestic E. coli outbreak, and infections "have left several children with kidney failure." Moreover, like people elsewhere, many Norwegians shop with an eye on the price, not the national origin of the food they eat (i.e., irrespective of food safety standards). Thus, Norwegians shop in cheaper Sweden; Swedes shop in Denmark and Danes shop in Germany. In pursuit of a bargain, Germans do some of their shopping in Poland.

I thought of my Norwegian trip, because of a recent news item pertaining to Brexit and the United Kingdom's desire to secure free trade deals with other large economies prior to Britain's withdrawal from the European Union. One of the planned free trade deals includes—the horror of horrors—the United States. Europeans have been brainwashed about the supposed dangers of American food for decades. The EU, for example, bans the import of hormone-treated American beef as well as chlorine-washed chickens. American GMOs, especially, have been anathematized. It will come as no surprise that EU farmers, looking out for their own interests, are strong supporters of the bans.

Along with high import tariffs and import quotas, the EU's outright bans on foreign food items ensure that food prices in Europe are kept artificially high. "EU protectionism," a House of Lords study found earlier this year, "means that huge additional expense is imposed on consumers who might wish to buy products from outside the bloc: on dairy products tariffs are 54 per cent, on sugar 31 per cent and on cereals 22 per cent. It is not surprising that food prices in the EU are significantly higher than world food prices."

Indeed, one of the greatest attractions of Brexit is that the United Kingdom will, once again, be in charge of its own trade policy and able to eliminate bans, tariffs and quotas on agricultural

imports, thus making food more affordable to those on the British Isles. Predictably, not everyone is on board with the trade liberalization agenda and British Secretary of State for International Trade Dr. Liam Fox is being raked over the coals for his willingness to allow American "chlorine-washed chicken... [to be] sold in Britain as part of a potential trade deal with the U.S. after Brexit."

Listening to some of the news coverage, you would have thought that American health and safety standards are non-existent, and Americans are being poisoned *en masse* by the unscrupulous U.S. food industry. Needless to say, chlorine-washed chicken is perfectly safe to eat, as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (that notorious tool of capitalism) reaffirmed just last year.

Why is this important? If the U.S.-U.K. trade negotiations stall because British food activists and protectionists refuse to recognize U.S. health and safety standards, one of the main benefits of Brexit—the lowering of British food prices—will be undermined. I have a better idea. Put a large sticker with the American flag on every U.S. chicken sold in the United Kingdom and let the British consumers decide if they are brave enough to buy it. If Norwegian consumers can devour a plate of Swedish meatballs at Ikea, British consumers can chow down an American chicken breast and save a few pennies to boot!

Marian L. Tupy is a policy analyst at the Cato Institute's Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity and editor of www.humanprogress.org