

Container inspection at port of entry

The BBC's *Fake Britain* series was not produced to make a contribution to the debate on options for UK trade once we leave the EU. However, this latest episode, which shows the identification, inspection and eventual rejection by the Port Health Officer at Southampton of a distinctly dodgy container, consisting mostly of food products from China, contains a number of incidental details of great importance to this subject which will be exercising the minds of government ministers and civil servants in the coming months.

Anyone interested in the subject of how trade passing through our ports is regulated should watch the first ten minutes of this episode while it is still available on the BBC website. (You will need a valid TV licence)

The first thing which strikes anyone watching this programme is the huge volume of containers handled at this port – 1.3 million per year. Southampton is a port of entry for goods from outside the EU and thus a first line of defence against risks to public health, not only for the UK but for the whole of the EU.

The officials are first drawn to examine the container because its documentation is incorrect. Then on inspection, the contents of the container are not the same as those on the packing list.

The Port Health Officer remarks that there is no EU-approved manufacturer for one of the meat products. People often say “China has no free trade agreement with the EU”. This is true enough but China has many agreements with the EU about mutually recognised standards of quality and traceability for different classes of product, approved manufacturers etc.

These agreements are mostly registered with the UN rather than the WTO. Many commentators discussing the trade issue have overlooked them, continuing to believe that tariffs are the main or sole barriers to trade. China's trade with the EU is therefore dependent on far more than "WTO rules" about tariffs alone.

These Mutual Recognition agreements are critical. If they did not exist, every single container from China would have to be inspected individually for compliance with EU standards – a hugely expensive and very onerous task given the volume of trade.

The legal compliance and safety of goods made and circulated within the EU rests on the common regulations enforced by each member state and certified in the documents accompanying each container. If these are all in order, containers from member states cannot usually be detained for inspection when crossing EU borders. That is the effect of the Single Market. Trade moves very much more easily. For this reason, there are very few BIPs (Border Inspection Posts) at ports which mostly handle trade from one EU country to another.

If the UK were to leave the EU without a comprehensive agreement on maintaining the mutual recognition of the standards (with which we already comply), then our trade with the EU would be gravely handicapped. Relying solely on basic "WTO rules" means that every container would have to be inspected. Some people have advocated "WTO rules" – saying "Better no agreement at all than a bad agreement". As far as we know, no other country relies on this sort of trade relationship with the EU.

Photo by Robert.Pittman 

Photo by Robert.Pittman 