

Customs Union confusion – yet again

Jeremy Corbyn gave a speech about Brexit in Coventry today. He was 100% correct in his observations about the Government's progress (or lack of it) :- *"They can't agree amongst themselves about what their priorities are or what future they want for Britain after Brexit.... The truth is we really don't know much more about where they're actually heading in these talks. "*

On the other hand, he has fallen into the trap into which a number of other politicians have fallen – he fails to understand what a customs union actually is. He said, *"During the transition period, Labour would seek to remain in a customs union with the EU and within the single market. That means we would abide by the existing rules of both."*

Why? if he wants us to stay within the single market, remaining in the customs union is superfluous. His reasoning is that *"when 44 per cent of our exports are to EU countries and 50 per cent of our imports come from the EU, then it is in both our interests for that trade to remain tariff-free."* That is fair enough, but Norway, which is not in the Customs union, manages virtual tariff-free trade with the EU. EFTA and EEA membership is sufficient.

Corbyn's confusion is laid bare when he says that *"Labour would seek to negotiate a new comprehensive UK-EU customs union to ensure that there are no tariffs with Europe and to help avoid any need for a hard border in Northern Ireland. "* How can the EU be part of a customs union with the UK while being a customs union in and of itself?

He then went on to say *"But we are also clear that the option of a new UK customs union with the EU would need to ensure the*

UK has a say in future trade deals. A new customs arrangement would depend on Britain being able to negotiate agreement of new trade deals in our national interest." If the UK was able to make its own trading arrangements, then it could not be in a customs union with the EU. The whole point of a customs union is that it includes a common external tariff. If we negotiated a trade deal with, for example, Australia while the EU did not have one, what would be the point if we were forced to charge the same tariff as the EU on Australian goods?

Perhaps Mr Corbyn and other advocates of either remaining in the EU's Customs Union or somehow creating a new one with the EU should see what goes on at Kapikule on the border between EU Bulgaria and non-EU Turkey. Turkey is linked to the EU's customs union, so you would expect reasonably seamless movement across the border. According to this report, however, this is far from being the case, with delays for lorries sometimes lasting for several days. A customs union may be a good idea for micro-states like Monaco or San Marino, but not for a country like the UK, where each year, over 2 million lorries pass through the port of Dover alone.

What we desperately need is a customs clearance agreement with the EU, or else we could face "Operation stack on steroids" on the M20 after Brexit Day. Unfortunately, if so many of our senior politicians cannot distinguish between customs clearance and a customs union, there are good reasons to fear that Kent may become gridlocked with lorries in a mere 396 days' time. Yes, it really is getting that close and on the basis of today's speech, it seems that the leader of Her Majesty's Opposition has no more idea of how to save us from such a disaster by delivering a sensible, workable Brexit than our Government.

Photo by Peanut99 