



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

DRAFT

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 6 June 2024

Session 6



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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**CONSTITUTION, EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
15th Meeting 2024, Session 6**

CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)
Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con)
Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Léa Auffret (EU Domestic Advisory Group)
Tanja Buzek (EU Domestic Advisory Group)
Sean McGuire (UK Domestic Advisory Group)
Irene Oldfather (UK Domestic Advisory Group)
Luísa Santos (EU Domestic Advisory Group)
Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

James Johnston

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 6 June 2024

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:11]

Review of the EU-UK Trade and Co-operation Agreement

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good morning, and a warm welcome to the 15th meeting in 2024 of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee. We have received apologies from Mark Ruskell, Meghan Gallacher and Keith Brown, and we are joined by committee substitute Kevin Stewart.

Our first agenda item is to continue to take evidence for the committee's inquiry into the review of the EU-UK trade and co-operation agreement. This morning, we will hear from two panels. Our first witnesses are from the United Kingdom domestic advisory group, or the DAG, as we usually call it. I offer a warm welcome to Sean McGuire, the chair of the DAG, and I welcome back Irene Oldfather, its vice-chair, who has engaged with us on such matters previously in this session of Parliament in her role on the Scottish advisory forum on Europe.

I note that you recently published your "2024-2025 Priorities Report", in which you highlight emerging and on-going issues in relation to the TCA. The focus of our inquiry has largely been on trade in goods, but we are interested in other aspects as well. The DAG members identified key issues in relation to trade in goods, as well as how the TCA could operate better to facilitate trade.

We would be interested to hear your thoughts on the priorities. Perhaps we could begin with Mr McGuire.

Sean McGuire (UK Domestic Advisory Group): Good morning. Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to address the committee.

As you said, I am chair of the domestic advisory group, but I am also director for Europe and international for the Confederation of British Industry. Given that we are in a regulated period, I note that I will be speaking on behalf of the DAG, not the CBI, and will be keeping my comments fairly general. However, once we are out of the regulated period, I will be willing to pick up on any further detail.

As you said, the DAG, which is comprised of business organisations, civil society, academia and trade unions, has recently published a report that highlights short-term and long-term measures that we think could improve not only relations between the UK and the European Union but the implementation and functioning of the TCA, with an eye to a review being carried out in 2026.

The five areas that we focused on were trade and customs; regulatory co-operation and a level playing field; business and labour mobility; energy and climate change; and the work that Irene Oldfather, the vice-chair, led on nations and regions.

09:15

It is important to outline that there are two elements to the report. The first is very much focused on practical and technical solutions that can be achieved without any political involvement or review of the TCA. Although the atmospherics and relations between the UK and the EU have improved since the conclusion of the Windsor framework, that perhaps has not been mirrored in the plumbing of the TCA and the various specialised trade committees that have been set up. A key aspect of the report is how we engage better with civil society, business organisations and trade unions to help the specialised committees to function more effectively, through identifying where the solutions to problems and challenges might lie.

It is worth noting that the TCA involves almost zero tariffs and quotas, so the challenges that individuals and businesses have experienced have probably related to non-tariff barriers and technical barriers to trade, which we can elaborate on.

Before we go into more detail, I point out that, although the DAG report is an expression of the DAG's position as a whole, it should not be seen as a reflection of the policy position of every individual organisation in the DAG, because the organisations come at the issues from different perspectives—some focus much more on sectoral issues, some focus much more on mobility issues and some focus much more on energy and climate issues. However, we stand behind the report, which provides a snapshot of some of the challenges in the UK-EU relationship and sets out where solutions can be found.

Irene Oldfather (UK Domestic Advisory Group): Good morning. I thank the committee for inviting me back—it is lovely to be here today.

Sean McGuire is our trade expert, and I bring a bit of the citizen voice to the agenda. I will say two things by way of introduction.

There are very close links between trade and citizens, but we do not always see it in that way. We think about trade as a business thing, but our report on the nations and regions reached right into our communities in Northern Ireland, Wales, England and Scotland through a partnership approach. I am proud that the DAG undertook that work, because it gave citizens an opportunity to have a say. If we had not done that, where would that opportunity have come from? It was important that we did that partnership work.

It is clear to me that, for citizens, trade is about the availability and cost of food in our supermarkets, it is about medicines on our high streets and it is about the safety of goods in our retail shops. Later in the meeting, we might be able to say a few words about inequalities and the barriers for citizens, including disabled people. Trade and trade agreements can make such a big difference in those areas.

Public Health Wales has been doing quite a lot of work, which you might be aware of—if not, I know that the Scottish Parliament information centre will be right on it, because it is an excellent team—on making trade agreements work for citizens. The way in which it has looked at wider trade agreements has been quite innovative.

The connection between trade and citizens is really important, and the UK DAG has certainly made sure to take account of that.

The Convener: Thank you very much for those opening remarks and for your report, which is included in our papers.

For this morning's meeting, we obviously have our European hats on, but the committee's remit also includes culture, and your report talks about the movement of workers, particularly those in the culture sector. I appreciate that, as Mr McGuire mentioned, you are in a regulated period during the election, but I want to ask about the EU's offer in relation to the youth mobility exchange. Does the DAG have a position on that, given that the two main parties in the UK have said no to the offer? With a new Government in the UK and a new Government forming in Europe after the elections, will there be opportunities for some of those issues to be revisited?

Irene Oldfather: Clearly, as a UK domestic advisory group reaching out to civil society, with young people as a huge part of that, it is incumbent on us to hear the views that young people express and to take them forward. A session was held in London last October, when I chaired one of the plenary meetings and two sub-group meetings. Clearly, the DAG report reflects the view of young people across the UK that they are keen to improve and increase opportunities for youth mobility.

I do not know whether Sean McGuire wants to add anything, but I will just say that we are not politicians; we represent the various sectors and social partners that the DAG represents, and it is clear that young people want to have the opportunities that are available.

Sean McGuire: I stress that youth mobility can be an important factor in many trade agreements. In fact, we have opportunities for youth mobility with Canada, so the issue should not be seen only from a UK-EU perspective. Youth mobility is important and it is not just about schoolchildren and school exchanges; it is much wider than that. Universities are certainly an important sector for the UK—it is a business sector, but I would say that it is much wider than that—and attracting foreign and international students is an important aspect for our university sector in the UK. Therefore, anything that can help to improve youth mobility is certainly welcome, and that is within the widest context, and not just the EU context.

The issue is also important to the business community. We would advocate for the opportunity of graduate schemes within companies to allow people to work in parts of the business that are outside the UK. That is particularly in line with the skills agenda and is important, as it allows us to attract the best talent from around the world to roles in the UK, and to give individuals and youth the opportunity to learn from others in other parts of the world.

We will see what happens after the elections in the UK and the EU, but youth mobility should cut across all trade agreements going forward and not just solely the one with the EU.

Irene Oldfather: We held an all-nations summit last November—Sean McGuire was there—and had a breakout group with young people, with strong representation from across all five nations. It was clear that those young people were keen to take forward the widest possible engagement. From discussions with the business community in Scotland, it is clear that businesses are supportive of schemes that give young people experience as well as language training, which has fallen quite a bit since Brexit. I know that the business community in Scotland is very supportive of apprenticeship and business exchanges involving young people.

As Sean says, there are agreements with Australia, New Zealand and other countries, but I personally thought that the European Commission's proposal was very ambitious, which was helpful. Let us hope that, going forward, we can work together to find common views on the issue.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I want to follow up Mr McGuire's point about

universities. I represent the great city of Aberdeen, where we have the University of Aberdeen and Robert Gordon University—both very important institutions. The University of Aberdeen has attracted students from overseas for centuries and RGU has done so for many decades. The EU's youth mobility proposals, which were rejected by Labour and the Tories, are a missed opportunity. We are seeing our university institutions being held back, stymied and, in some cases, put in positions of crisis because of the inability of overseas students to get the relevant visas.

Ms Oldfather talked about the trade agreements with Australia and others. In the past, people were attracted not only from the European Union but particularly from certain places in Africa and Asia, but that seems to have gone. What is the DAG doing to look at that? What engagement have you had with the universities? I have talked about the universities in Aberdeen, but the difficulties and the inability to get students in are the same for universities throughout Scotland and these islands.

Irene Oldfather: I am happy to pick that up, Mr Stewart.

Kevin Stewart: Yes, please. It is good to see you.

Irene Oldfather: Good morning. Just to let you know, the Scottish advisory forum on Europe, which feeds into the DAG has been very much consulted. We have a whole range of universities on the nations and regions sub-group. You are right that universities such as St Andrews, Aberdeen and Edinburgh are very affected by this situation. They have had an opportunity to have an input and they clearly support that position. In its report, the DAG alludes to that and mentions the importance of youth mobility and the role of universities. We are certainly reaching out to the academic communities and we are very much hearing what they say.

At our last DAG meeting in Edinburgh, we heard from Nick Thomas-Symonds, and we put to him almost the very question that you have put to me, recognising the merit and the value in the European Commission paper. Therefore, you can be assured that the DAG is very actively pursuing these matters. It takes Governments to make the decisions, but we are very actively pursuing these matters, having heard very strongly the voice of academia across the UK.

Kevin Stewart: You are right to point out that it is the Governments that make the decisions. Unfortunately, in my opinion, the UK Government is making all the wrong decisions in all of this.

Do you really think that you have the influence to change minds on these extremely important issues, which are affecting people and institutions

and stymieing economic growth? At the end of the day, if we are not attracting the best students here, we do not have the opportunity for them to join our workforce. In the past, many of the people who have come here to study have been some of the greatest minds and entrepreneurs we have had.

Irene Oldfather: Like you, Mr Stewart, I am very proud of our Scottish education system. I suppose that your question is whether we are doing enough. We are working very closely with European partners. The European Economic and Social Committee has recently produced an opinion that was agreed by the whole committee at the end of April. Scotland was very much involved in that. The opinion was by Cillian Lohan. In taking soundings on that, he attended our all-nations conference in Edinburgh last November, which I referred to, and consulted with the young people there.

09:30

We work closely with our European partners, and we have regular meetings with the EU delegation to the UK. We raised these matters with Pedro Serrano when he was in Scotland in April. Sean McGuire may want to say a few words about how we are consulting on a wider basis on the report. Because we are in purdah, we will not get meetings with ministers, but we certainly look forward in the months after the election to raising these matters directly, which are in our report and which we are very supportive of. Do you want to add something on the communications and engagement around that, Sean?

Sean McGuire: The report is a snapshot in time. It does not deal with all issues, and it does not go into every detail of every aspect of the report. If that were the case, it would be much longer than the 20-odd pages that it is. It shows where business, trade unions, civil society and academia have come together to highlight where there are challenges and, indeed, where there are opportunities. It is also worth bearing in mind that the UK is just one party to the agreement; there is also the European Union.

You alluded to the youth mobility communication from the Commission a few months ago. Certainly, for the EU DAG, which is our counterpart, mobility and youth mobility are a high priority. If and when the politics calm down after the election in the UK and the election of the new Commission in the EU, there is an opportunity for us and the EU DAG to work together on key issues.

I also highlight that we have to be realistic about how quickly we can move forward in a number of these areas. The period since 2016 has been incredibly difficult, but the negotiations and relations are certainly much better than they were

a few years ago. However, we need to sell why moving forward on youth mobility is not just in the interest of the UK but in the interest of Europe and the EU as a whole.

Certainly, our EU counterparts look with envy at the quality of our universities—indeed, it is a startling statistic that, after the UK left the EU, there is not a top-10 university in the EU. There is certainly an element of jealousy or a need to work with our universities because of the quality of the universities in the UK.

There is a win-win situation, and we should focus on where there is a win-win for both sides so that we can move forward, not purely for the optics but because it can bring economic value and address some of the societal challenges that both the UK and the EU face on climate change, artificial intelligence and the skills agenda. We can work with the EU on a joint campaign on the mobility issue, particularly youth mobility and universities.

Kevin Stewart: You are optimistic in hoping that politics calms down in the UK. There might be chaos for years to come because of the decision to leave the European Union.

In your engagement with academia and the universities on these issues, do they highlight to you the major difficulties that they face because they are unable—well, they are not unable to attract folk—to get folk the necessary paperwork to study in Scotland? What are universities saying to you about their financial positions? Some have lost a huge amount of income because of that. Some have suggested that, if there are no changes, they might be in precarious positions in the future, which they would not be in if we still had free movement.

Sean McGuire: My response will be very brief. I do not want to speak on behalf of individual universities and their financing, but the headline story is that, as a result of the removal of free movement and, indeed, lack of co-operation on mobility of youth, the attractiveness of UK universities to international students has diminished. That has had a direct impact on the financing of many of our universities, which saw those students as a major source of income. Certainly, we would call on any Government to look at this issue seriously in the wider context of universities as an important sector in the UK, not just in respect of academia and education but with regard to their investment and export potential, too.

Irene Oldfather: Your question was about what universities have been talking to us about, and I can honestly say that the two most important things that have been raised by universities are Erasmus+ and horizon.

We lobbied very hard on horizon alongside the universities, and we are very pleased that that door has been opened. We hope that it will open the way to other possibilities, but the fact is that the universities are very pleased. Indeed, various summits are coming up in the next few weeks not just about how we can be part of horizon but about how we in the UK and Scotland can actually lead on horizon projects. The chief scientist Anna Dominiczak is being very active in that area, having led horizon projects in the past. Horizon, therefore, has been a really big talking point with the universities.

The second thing, as you would expect, is Erasmus+, which, again, links into the issue of youth mobility. You will be aware of the work in Wales on the Taith scheme; indeed, we refer to it in our nations and regions report. That could be a model, but, even as far as Wales is concerned, there is agreement that it would be really good to have some kind of active Erasmus+ programme back in place again. For me, those are the two big issues.

Kevin Stewart: I am glad that you have managed to help to open one door, but there are still many more doors to open.

Irene Oldfather: I agree.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Good morning. We have talked a lot about youth mobility but, as the convener mentioned at the outset, the DAG's recent report highlights the importance of mobility for artists and technical support staff through a cultural worker visa. That will obviously affect a lot of young people, but it will affect people of all ages, too. How has that recommendation been received, and how likely is it to progress?

Sean McGuire: How well has it been received? I will be very honest: we sent this to the European Commission, and, indeed, many of our European stakeholders, and they have been very tight-lipped in their responses. After all, they do not have a mandate to go much further than the current provisions in the TCA.

This is perhaps one of the frustrations that many DAG members have expressed throughout the process. As I have said, the big politics relationship seems to be better, but the various specialist committees, working groups and so on have probably been underperforming. It is certainly an issue that has been highlighted in many discussions with the DAG.

When these issues are raised, whether by the UK side or whoever, people have a nice conversation, leave and do not meet again for another six months. One of the report's big recommendations—and, indeed, something that we have been advocating for—is that there must be much more co-operation between the UK and

the EU on many of these issues to find practical, technical solutions.

The cultural waiver recommendation is noted by the EU side but, of course, it does not have a mandate to go much further, and that is perhaps the frustration that many of our UK colleagues have had.

In fact, it should not be limited to a cultural waiver. We would like that to be extended more widely. We have talked about trading goods, but one of the great assets of the UK is our services sector, and our universities are part of that. Given that a big part of providing services is linked to mobility, we would like to see a much more ambitious agreement on that issue relating to the provision of services, as well as the cultural waiver.

You will note that the UK has chosen six months while the EU has chosen 90 out of 180 days. We would like the EU to push towards six months and have much more of an open-door policy on this. I think that there is something for the EU to do to help us to address some of these challenges.

As I said, the atmosphere is better in the high-level politics, but, when it comes to getting things through in the various specialised committees and working groups—indeed, some of the working groups have not met—we find that the full potential of the TCA has not been fulfilled.

Neil Bibby: Clearly, in negotiating such a complex agreement as the TCA, people will want to look at the detail of specific issues but also to look at it in the round. I imagine that it is particularly challenging to look at the details while also looking at things in the round.

I have a question that follows on from our previous discussion with the DAG about the Law Society of Scotland. I understand that the DAG has representation from England and Wales via the Law Society and the Bar Council, but that the Law Society of Scotland is not a specific member of the DAG. Irene, I know that you were hoping that that would be addressed. Is there any update on that? Clearly, if there are legal ramifications for the devolved nations and, in particular, Scotland, it would be advantageous to have input from the Law Society of Scotland.

Irene Oldfather: That is a really important point, Neil.

On your point about the cultural situation, the DAG's position is certainly that we support that visa waiver. We recognise how important it is for musicians and other artists to have an extension beyond the 90 days, so it is our policy to support that.

Sean McGuire, Steve Turner and I had some discussions with the secretariat around the

situation in relation to the Law Society of Scotland. You will know that membership of the DAG has been reopened. It is not in the DAG's gift to decide on membership, but I have had some communications with the Law Society of Scotland and encouraged it to apply.

The situation has been a huge disappointment. It is something that we raised from the get-go. I will be honest: as an executive council, we were very supportive of the Law Society of Scotland having a place. The UK DAG is sitting at 60-odd members, and the argument that was always made to us was, "The UK DAG is very big just now." However, the inequity that you point out is something that the executive council has consistently raised, and I fully expect it to be addressed in the opening up of the membership. It is open until 19 June, I think.

I do not know whether Sean McGuire wants to add anything.

Sean McGuire: It was to be open until 19 June, but we are now in a *purdah* period. The membership requires ministerial decisions, which will probably be delayed until after the election. Of course, the operation of Government takes some time to bed down after an election, but we will keep the pressure on to ensure that there is geographical representation on the DAG, as Irene Oldfather said, because we think that that is incredibly important.

The Convener: Mr Stewart is next—the other Mr Stewart.

09:45

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Good morning, panel members. Mr McGuire, you talked about the report being a snapshot of where we are at present. When it comes to participation and engagement, especially in areas such as citizens' rights and equality, the nations and regions sub-group raised issues about the relationship between the EU and the UK and equalities that do not fall within the remit of the TCA. How is progress on equality and social policy being monitored? There were concerns that the UK frameworks in that area might fall behind in some ways, and we want to ensure that accessibility, equality and transparency are very much part of the process.

It would be good to get a flavour as to whether we are meeting expectations, or whether there are concerns about the mismatch that still appears to be there. There have been areas on which concerns have been raised but things have been ironed out or progressed. It would be good to get a flavour as to where you think we are and what opportunities there might be. As we know, we are in a change situation, given what might happen in

the United Kingdom with elections in a few weeks, and with Europe having had elections already. That may have an impact on what can, might and will be done in future.

Sean McGuire: As I mentioned at the outset, one of the key aspects of the DAG's work was around regulatory co-operation and a level playing field. It is clear from the DAG report that we call on both parties to uphold their commitments in the TCA and also to remain in line with International Labour Organization conventions and other European and international conventions when it comes to human rights and equality. That view is shared across the board by the membership of the DAG.

The UK and the EU are two independent sovereign entities and have the right to regulate and legislate. As the DAG, we will be monitoring legislation in the UK and the EU to ensure that those entities remain committed to and uphold the commitments in the TCA.

As you said, there were a few issues, and they have been ironed out. It is important that dialogue continues and that there are on-going conversations between both parties. I would say that we are in a fairly good place at the moment, but there is a risk, which is implicit and explicit in our report. As I said, there are two sovereign entities that can move forward, and there can be unintended consequences of legislation on both sides. One role of the DAG, and certainly the sub-group that we have set up on regulatory co-operation and a level playing field, would be to monitor UK and EU action and regulatory activity to ensure that neither side undermines the commitments that are outlined in the TCA or the commitments to international standards. That is very much our role.

It is important to underline that the key role of the DAG is to ensure the full functioning and implementation of the TCA. We stand strongly behind and defend the elements of the TCA in areas relating to human rights, equality and social policy.

Alexander Stewart: The working groups and committees that have been set up in the past have managed to balance some of the issues and negotiate others, but there is still a tension. Do you think that there is still a tension that leads to there being winners and losers? If you had a wish list, what would you like to happen?

Sean McGuire: I would not say that there is a tension. That is not the word for it. As I said, the period from 2016 onwards, through the negotiations, has been a difficult time. In order for any relationship to work to its full capacity, it is important that it is built on trust. That is the important aspect as we go forward. Both sides

must trust each other, and when issues arise, both sides must feel that there are fora in which they can discuss, negotiate, find solutions and understand where people on the other side are coming from. In the past, there has been a challenge when issues have become more political, because there has not been regular dialogue and conversation. In the absence of that, mistrust has set in.

In fact, when both sides have come to the table and talked about issues, they have realised that they are not that far apart. As we go forward, my big wish is that we can put the past eight years behind us. It is important to stress that both sides need to look forward, rather than being restrained by the shackles of the past. We are in a very volatile world at the moment, whether we are talking about the geopolitical situation, economic insecurities, climate change, the growth of China, what might happen in the US or the situation in India. The UK and the EU face a lot of issues. Working together, we can move forward and address some of the societal challenges. It is important that we are seen as good neighbours, rather than as adversaries.

That requires a mind shift on both sides. The point that I really want to emphasise is that, although there have been difficult times, as we move ahead, we cannot afford to waste years arguing. We must work together to address the many societal and geopolitical challenges that we face at the moment, such as the cost of living crisis. In that context, how we improve the competitiveness of the continent of Europe is of the utmost importance. The UK and the EU should be working hand in hand to ensure that we give top priority to improving the competitiveness of the continent of Europe.

To go back to Irene Oldfather's opening remarks, that is important not just for business but for citizens and consumers, in granting prosperity and moving people out of poverty. We should be focusing on win-win economics, so that it can deliver on societal challenges, as well.

Alexander Stewart: Ms Oldfather, I recognise that the whole area of where we are when it comes to society and the rights, obligations, wishes and aspirations of citizens is very much part of what is trying to be achieved, but it would be good to get your view on what the barriers are, because there are still barriers. Attempts have been made to co-operate and collaborate on some things. Some of those attempts have been successful; others have not. Sometimes, one side has had a different opinion or view on what should happen.

However, at the end of the day, civil society and citizens still have a role to play in what we are trying to establish. They want to create and be part

of the future. That future is dependent on the views and opinions that people have and the side that they sit on. The success of the process will depend on how citizens themselves manage that.

Irene Oldfather: Those are really good points, and I echo everything that Sean McGuire said.

Your first question was about equality issues. First, I would say that we have a very good working relationship with the EU DAG, which offers great possibilities going forward. It takes time to set up these things, and we are all new to this—well, the EU is not quite new to it, because it has had domestic advisory groups in the past, but it is very new for the UK and the EU to sit in DAGs across the table from each other in partnership. We have now developed a very good working relationship with the EU DAG.

However, I will mention a couple of points, one of which probably sits outside the TCA—again, it is an issue that we could work on with our EU colleagues—namely, the impact on disabled people. For example, on disabled badges, pre-Brexit, there was voluntary co-operation across all member states on acknowledging disabled badges and that disabled people did not pay for parking. That arrangement broke down following Brexit. It seems like a really simple issue, but it is not quite fixed yet.

Previously, the European Union did not even have an agreement across all 27 member states that was regulatory as opposed to voluntary. However, quite recently, it put in place a regulatory agreement on disabled parking. We have asked whether that agreement could somehow be extended to enable co-operation with our EU partners in order to acknowledge what had previously always been part of that scheme for EU disabled citizens. That is quite a big issue for disabled groups. It is an issue that can be sorted, and is one that I do not think requires an amendment to the TCA. It requires the goodwill that Sean McGuire has mentioned and for us all to recognise the issue and, equally, for us to ensure that disabled badges from Europe are used in the UK, which they can be.

The other matter, which probably would require some amendments, relates to veterinary issues. Members probably know that assistance and service dogs fall within the part 2 listing of the TCA as opposed to the part 1 listing and that there are therefore customs and import barriers. That it is one of the unintended consequences that Sean spoke about. With regard to equality, we should not really have assistance dogs sitting in a restricted category; that should be opened up.

Those are two examples of how, using that good will, co-operation and those more constructive discussions, which I feel that we are

now having, could help us to resolve citizens' issues.

The Convener: I have a question on the back of Alexander Stewart's questions. On human rights, I appreciate everything that you have said, but we were in the position of the UK Government talking about withdrawing from the United Nations and from the European convention on human rights in order to implement the deportation of migrants to Rwanda. Were that to have gone ahead, would that have been a deal breaker in terms of human rights co-operation with the EU?

Irene Oldfather: I do not know whether you want to pick that one up, Sean. Given that we are in the election purdah period, that is a difficult question to answer. It is more a matter of opinion.

Sean McGuire: I agree with Irene Oldfather that that it is difficult to answer, given the various political parties' positions on that. I would be happy to answer that question after 4 July, if that is okay, convener.

10:00

The Convener: We will maybe seize that opportunity to take that up with you then.

My other question is about consumer rights, which Irene Oldfather mentioned earlier. This is child safety week in the UK, and, at last night's meeting of the cross-party group on accident prevention and safety awareness, the Child Accident Prevention Trust delivered a presentation, and trading standards officers showed us examples of some of the goods that are available in online marketplaces that do not meet the standards that we would expect in the UK and Europe. Given that British standards remain part of the broad European approach, do you think that there are opportunities to strengthen some of the consumer aspects of what is proposed, and to strengthen regulation on issues such as artificial intelligence?

Sean McGuire: Very much so, and that is one of the areas that we want to focus on. It involves mutual recognition, particularly of conformity assessment, and sharing of information, and, in that regard, I know that the UK and the EU have recently agreed on the rapid exchange of information system—RAPEX.

In the areas of product safety, child safety and so on, the UK and the EU have similar standards, and, indeed, in most cases, the UK standards are higher than those of the EU, although that might not be the perception. One of the points that I have been making to our EU counterparts is that, despite the noise in media and so on, the UK standards are top-end gold standards in those areas. In the midst of all the rhetoric, people often

miss the fact that the UK has high standards in quite a few areas, and, in areas such as animal welfare, the standards are much higher.

This area is safe ground, and it is in the interest of both sides to work collectively to ensure the safety of products, so it is very much a priority. However, businesses are finding that having to operate two systems challenging. It is costly and complex for a small business to apply a UK standard and an EU standard, and that might discourage some small businesses from exporting to the EU, which represents a loss to the UK economy. Exports can create jobs, and that goes back to the citizen aspect that was mentioned earlier. Therefore, anything that can reduce the administrative burden and ensure consistency between the UK and the EU, with mutual recognition agreements on conformity assessment, and make it easier for both sides to trade will be of great importance to us.

Of course, I would very much underline that the high standards must remain. This is not about a race to the bottom; it is about upholding high consumer rights, while making it easier for a product that is deemed safe by the UK standards, which are high standards, to be sold in the EU without unnecessary administration.

We very much support the continuation of high consumer standards, but it is an area where both sides could get together to have more mutual agreements.

Irene Oldfather: I echo everything that Sean McGuire said. The EU has its Safety Gate database system, and the UK has a similar system, so, from the point of view of consumers, it makes sense for them to talk to each other and for the situation to be resolved quickly in the interests of citizens and consumers.

The Convener: Thank you once again for your attendance. No doubt we will be back in contact after the election as we continue to pursue our inquiry on the TCA.

10:04

Meeting suspended.

10:14

On resuming—

The Convener: I welcome witnesses from the EU domestic advisory group. Luísa Santos is chair of the group, and Tanja Buzek and Léa Auffret are vice-chairs. I will open the questions.

In our inquiry, we have heard from various businesses and stakeholders based in the UK about the challenges of trading with the EU post-Brexit. I would be interested in hearing the

perspectives of EU businesses and civil society on how the TCA has been operating from their side. Have you seen any changes following the introduction of the border controls, as laid out in the Windsor agreement? What are your priorities for developing the current scope of the TCA to better facilitate trade between the EU and the UK?

We can begin with Luísa Santos, please.

Luísa Santos (EU Domestic Advisory Group): Thank you very much. I hope that you can hear me well—we had some microphone issues just before we started.

Good morning, and thanks a lot for inviting us to the meeting. The three of us represent three different groups. I will start with some initial remarks, and I will then focus more on the business side, which you mentioned. My two colleagues will then focus on their priorities.

We all agree that the UK remains a very important partner for the EU. However, it is not just an economic partner. We recall that the UK is still the third trading partner for the EU after the US and China. That is important, and it sometimes needs to be recalled, as people tend to forget it. However, it is also a partner from a political point of view in light of the current geopolitical context.

It is important that the EU and the UK are very well aligned on foreign policy and security issues. We have been co-operating on responding to Russia's aggression in Ukraine. We also align on many different topics within the G7, including on economic security, which is very important for the EU, as it is for the UK. We are very aligned on all those foreign policy, security and defence issues, and we need to co-operate further. That is definitely one area in which I see the need from all perspectives, including the business perspective, for further co-operation between the EU and the UK.

We see the elections in the EU this weekend and in the UK in July as an opportunity to, let us say, reboot the relationship. The EU DAG shares that view. In our BusinessEurope campaign, we talk about the need to reboot Europe. Maybe we also need to reboot the EU-UK relationship a bit, recognising that it has improved after a very tense period of negotiations.

The Windsor framework in particular has improved the general environment, and it has brought a more positive spin. We have already seen results. The fact that the UK is now part of horizon Europe is very important for the scientific community and the business community, and overall for our joint research and innovation efforts. That is a very important step.

More recently, we have seen co-operation in RAPEX on the detection of products that could be

of concern for the safety of consumers. Consumers on the European side and the UK side are very happy with that. We are again co-operating there, which is important.

So, we have seen some positive developments, but we still see some challenges, of course. One clear challenge relates to the facilitation of trade between the EU and the UK. We have, of course, introduced border controls, and some border controls are still in the process of being introduced. The new border target operating model, or BTOM, is clearly one of those. We will have to see with time and more controls how that will impact overall trade between the EU and the UK, because the process will be staged.

Another issue is the connection with Northern Ireland. We are very happy with the Windsor framework, because it is important that we respect the Good Friday agreement and that there is peace and stability in Northern Ireland. That is very important for us all, including businesses, consumers, trade unions and citizens. We are particularly looking at the impact on the facilitation of trade in goods in Northern Ireland, which is very important.

Another aspect relates to regulations in general—not only the level playing field but the potential addition of new barriers to trade if legislation starts to diverge a lot. There have been a lot of new EU initiatives in relation to the green deal and the digital single market, and the more that the UK legislates in those areas, the greater the potential for divergence. There will need to be more work in that key area. We have working groups that are dedicated to regulatory co-operation, and those groups need to be fully working. There are probably other areas in which such work needs to be taken forward and implemented in the future.

In relation to the climate and energy, we are in the middle of discussions on whether the UK will introduce its own carbon border adjustment measure. The EU has its carbon border adjustment mechanism, and it would be good if we could align our systems and policies on how to address carbon leakage.

A level playing field—which, I am sure, Tanja Buzek will touch on—is very important in relation to not only the environment but social rights. If we do not keep things at the same level, there is the risk of a negative impact on the TCA, and it is important that we respect those commitments.

Issues relating to services are important because they have an impact on goods and people. We know how sensitive matters relating to migration and the movement of people are these days, but the fact that we are less able to go between the EU and the UK and to provide

services in both markets is creating additional issues. Both sides still need to do a lot of work on the recognition of professional qualifications, there are issues with some UK initiatives and sponsorship programmes in relation to our professional services being provided in the UK, and there are also concerns about culture and arts services. Work needs to be done in those areas.

Another issue relates to data. Through its data adequacy decision, the EU has unilaterally granted things to the UK, but it is very important that the UK stays aligned with the EU on data privacy, otherwise that data adequacy decision will be withdrawn eventually. Ideally, we should have a more stable solution under the agreement. For example, there should be an arrangement similar to the one that we have with Japan so that we have, ideally, a permanent solution in that area.

Finally—I do not want to take up too much of your time—it is important to restate that the EU DAG has been co-operating with the UK DAG. It is very important that there is co-operation between people in civil society, that there are exchanges on areas in which we have common interests and that we point out areas in which we see problems. It will also be very important to have more co-operation with the Parliamentary Partnership Assembly, as the other important body monitoring the overall trade agreement.

I will end there and give the floor to my colleagues. I am sure that we will go a bit deeper into some of these matters. I am happy to answer any questions you might have.

The Convener: Thank you. I invite Tanja Buzek to go next.

Tanja Buzek (EU Domestic Advisory Group): Thank you—I hope that I am audible. I apologise for the rather poor setting, but I am right in the middle of a Council meeting in Brussels.

Thank you very much for this opportunity to engage. I can seamlessly follow on from what Luísa Santos has just said. First, I would say that, on the one hand, we are seeing a positive development in the relationship between the EU and the UK, which is something what we in the EU and the UK domestic advisory groups had been jointly advocating. It is and will always be a unique relationship, and we want to contribute to its improvement.

Of course, as Luísa has also said, we are on the verge of elections. As a matter of fact, the UK election was actually scheduled for date of the civil society forum that was supposed to happen in July here in Brussels. However, we have now postponed everything until September, which will give us an opportunity for the two DAGs to come together in a new setting after the UK election and

the European Parliament elections to see how we can strengthen the relationship.

As far as the two domestic advisory groups are concerned—I thank Luísa very much for highlighting the co-operation aspect—we have a slightly different set-up. We started the work of focusing on our priorities in a different way; the UK DAG produced its report, and we produced our issues tracker. There are a lot of overlaps, and in the coming months—and as preparation for the September meeting—we will seek to explore those areas together and see where we can come up with solutions.

Luísa has already touched on this, too, but speaking as a representative of the workers group of the European Economic and Social Committee, I think—and this is a view that we share with the other groups in the domestic advisory group—that one of the core points is the level playing field and regulatory co-operation. We have raised a lot of concerns, particularly with the Commission, about a number of UK legislative acts, especially the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act 2023, and its impact on core commitments with regard to the protection of labour rights under the TCA. Of course, there have been a couple of other announcements, but when it comes to strikes and the use of agency workers and replacements, we can only warn about and monitor the possible impacts. It is a particular issue for the workers group.

I am sure that this will also be the case with my colleagues of the business side of things, but something that we in the workers group feel very strongly about is that we should act together with our trade union counterparts on the UK DAG side. The pure fact is that the Trades Union Congress and the sectoral trade unions are still part of the European trade union family—indeed, the TUC is still part of the European Trade Union Confederation—and we share the joint concern that, collectively, we need to bring all these things together.

Beyond those views of the workers group and the trade unions, I think that it is important to uphold and build on the level playing field commitments. I recall that, in our informal DAG-to-DAG meeting that was also meant as preparation for the September meeting, we had a conversation in which we highlighted the importance of upholding those commitments and ensuring that there is no infringement on either side, given the impact on competition policy. For us, there is a strong nexus between the two things.

I also thank Luísa very much for mentioning the situation in Northern Ireland. In that respect, we are in strong alignment with our UK DAG colleagues that there must be no diminution of rights on the Northern Ireland side—and I am

thinking in particular of the link to the Windsor framework. There is also the linkage with the human rights angle in article 2 of that framework, which is something that I think has been very well set out in the UK DAG report and is an element to which we fully subscribe in relation to Northern Ireland. Those, I think, would be the two elements that I would highlight. Regulatory co-operation is important, too—Léa Auffret might well touch on that. However, despite our strong commitment to working on that, it feels a bit like we have not yet made progress on it or explored its potential.

So you see, moving seamlessly from Luísa Santos to me and followed up by Léa Auffret, we are very much in line on many of the core topics.

Visas and mobility are an important topic and not only for the service sector, as we have touched on. For us, we need to uphold conditionality in respect of labour and employment rights. There should not be just a fast track or short visa exchange. There are a lot of elements that are linked from the overall topics, and they always revert back to upholding and protecting labour rights commitments in the TCA.

I will close my first comments there, but I am of course happy to come back—[Inaudible.]

The Convener: I am afraid that we lost your sound there at the end, Tanja. I do not know whether you can hear us. It was just the last few seconds of what you said that we lost. We will move on to Léa Auffret and then, hopefully, we will be able to get back to you with questions.

Léa Auffret (EU Domestic Advisory Group): Thank you again for the invitation to speak to the committee. It is really important for us as DAG members to have this conversation with you. I echo what my colleagues have just said about the importance of the relationship and the improvement of the relationship.

I will give you a bit of insight into what we are doing in the EU domestic advisory group and specifically my group, which is group 3. It is a bit different from Luísa Santos's group, which focuses on businesses on the European side, and Tanja Buzek's group, which focuses on trade unions. My group is more a gathering of completely diverse interests, from European universities to groups that are protecting oceans, focusing on animal welfare and working on environment protection, as well as many others, including my organisation, which looks at consumer protection. Therefore, my group looks more at the public interest aspect of the relationship and not specifically at trade in goods and services in the commercial sense.

One thing that I echo from what my colleague just said is that, for my group, it is really important that we keep on promoting a higher level of protection when it comes to the environment,

consumers and animal welfare, and that we keep the co-operation between universities. We have had very positive developments.

To keep it short, I will just echo what Tanja Buzek said: there is a difference between what we are hearing at the highest political level on co-operation and the developments and progress on that. We had a recent statement regarding the development of co-operation, including on market surveillance, which we had just mentioned. There is now the possibility to have co-operation and to exchange data. The highest political level has given the green light to that, so now both sides should be able to co-operate. However, that is not what I am hearing out in the field. There is a difference, and I am not sure that that co-operation will materialise any time soon—not even this year.

It is important for parliamentarians to be involved in that and to better understand the problem and how we can unlock that co-operation. Sometimes, it is really at a technical level, so it is important to look a bit below the surface and see what more we could all do. On our side, we need to try to stimulate co-operation and help authorities to connect again in a positive manner.

On top of market surveillance co-operation, it is about how we continue to co-operate and work together when it comes to climate and environmental protection. How can we in Europe learn from what the UK is doing on animal welfare protection, where there is a lot of progress that the EU could get inspiration from? We could maybe look at creating a veterinary area and at co-operating more on food safety aspects and in relation to the border target operating model. There are many things that we can continue to work on.

I will just flag up that we are sometimes a bit limited in our scope and in what we can do as a domestic advisory group because our focus is on the trade and co-operation agreement. There are many co-operation areas that are not yet foreseen in the agreement and that we would need to see as part of the natural development of the new relationship.

It could be interesting to explore from the Parliament's perspective how we could expand that scope. The review process for the trade and co-operation agreement will come up soon, so perhaps we could explore how we can be more flexible in terms of further developing the new relationship.

I will leave it there for the moment, but I would be happy to answer any further questions that you have.

The Convener: That is super. Thank you all for those opening statements. I move to questions from the committee.

Alexander Stewart: In the previous evidence session, we discussed mutual recognition systems, and Irene Oldfather discussed where we are on disabled individuals and disabled people's parking rights. There is obviously a logjam with that, and I know that there is an attempt to have some sort of mutual recognition system when that comes together. It would be good to get a flavour of whether you see that as something that can be achieved in the medium to short term. Are there more problems along the lines of disabled individuals and citizens having difficulties when they go from one place to the other?

Luísa Santos: On mutual recognition in general, the European DAG's priority has been the professionals. There is a lot of exchange between the EU and UK. We are talking about the accountants, lawyers and architects. Those have been the priorities. We know that one profession is more developed. The framework is there, but it is up to the professions to come up with the proposals. We know that the architects have been in discussion and are more advanced, but so far the proposals that have been made are not exactly well balanced, so there is still not an agreement on that one.

There is less interest, at least for the moment, from the other professional associations—or at least there is less proactiveness in coming up with solutions—but this issue requires, first, a proposal from the private sector and then an acceptance by the two Governments of what is proposed. That is what I can tell you so far. More work definitely needs to be done, starting with civil society, or in this case, the private actors, service providers and the professionals, before something is proposed to the two Governments.

Alexander Stewart: I also talked about transparency and the frustrations that are still apparent, and the knowledge that we want to try and iron out as many difficulties as we can, but there is still conflict in many areas. As you identify, elections are coming in the not-too-distant future for you and for us, which may give a change of direction. Would that diminish some of that frustration and progress things, or will we still be in the same locations?

Luísa Santos: I hope that things will progress. That is the only thing that we all expect. The situation and the relations remain very politically charged—we should not fool ourselves. Those urgencies lead us to co-operate more, particularly in relation to the threats or potential threats that we are confronted with in both the EU and the UK. We are on the same side on that. Those things are much more important and could create an environment that is politically more positive for further co-operation.

On the purely economic side, and maybe on issues that have to do with the way in which we legislate in key areas, there might still be tensions. I am not saying that that will not be the case. We know that one of the most critical factors in the UK leaving the EU was regulations and the fact that the UK wanted to define its own objectives and its own rules, so I think that there will continue to be some friction in that regard. However, that does not mean that we will not be able to co-operate. If we have the same objectives, the fact that we have different ways of achieving them will not push us further apart. However, the way in which the UK legislates in some of those areas will be fundamental in future, especially in relation to things that have to do with sustainability, broadly, and in relation to specific rules in sectors that are highly regulated, such as machinery, chemicals and pharmaceuticals. We have not seen a huge divergence so far but, if there is more of a divergence in future, the amount of friction will increase.

My conviction is that the general geopolitical context will force the Governments to co-operate more. At the initial stage, that might happen more around issues relating to defence and security, but I expect that, with a new Government on the two sides, there will definitely be a new way of approaching things, and there will be a concrete discussion about how and when we can develop this new approach.

Alexander Stewart: The Windsor framework was welcomed and embraced by both sides. How do you see that approach developing in future? Could there be a mark 2 Windsor framework, with more progress on certain areas, such as citizenship, trade and mobility? Those are all still live situations and circumstances, and the hope is that there could be more negotiations and discussions about what might be achieved for the future in that regard.

Luísa Santos: The Northern Ireland issue is recognised by everyone, and we want to have a stable environment there, so we are all looking at how the Windsor framework is implemented and whether it works. There was a lot of scepticism from a lot of sides on whether it would work. Even in the current situation, the two Governments have always shared the attitude that we have to be very careful with regard to the implementation of the Windsor framework. The most recent joint statement from the UK DAG and the EU DAG pointed to the need to have very good monitoring of the situation and excellent dialogue with the business community and civil society. That is important in order to ensure that some of the concerns are dissipated and that we reach a more normal relationship in which the concerns that were raised by business and civil society in Northern Ireland do not materialise on the ground.

That will remain important for all of us and for all our groups.

This is a work in progress; it is not over yet, and it will continue to be one of the key aspects in the relationship. However, we are now proceeding on a more positive basis.

Alexander Stewart: Time is moving on, and I know that others want to come in, so I will leave it there.

The Convener: We are conscious of time, but I offer Tanja Buzek and Léa Auffret an opportunity to respond to Mr Stewart's question, if they want to.

10:45

Léa Auffret: At this stage, I do not have anything specific to add, but Tanja might want to say something.

Tanja Buzek: My apologies. The muting and unmuting is not as smooth as it could be. I also apologise to the convener: I seem to have a rather unstable internet connection. I apologise for breaking off earlier.

Alexander Stewart made a very good point. Over time, we will realise that standards no longer match, and that will have an impact on the real lives of people. We must find a solution to the issue that was touched on of the obstacles to mobility between the UK and the EU countries. I will give another example from our side. The EU has introduced a lot of legislation on, for example, due diligence and platform work, which includes a lot of protections for workers' rights. However, there has been no equivalent legislation on the UK side so far. We need to look very strongly at that if we want to achieve the overarching goal of upholding the level playing field commitments.

It is true, of course, that things move on over time, but it is important for us that the core or the anchor of the agreement is that the level playing field commitments are upheld and that the levelling of rights is protected.

Neil Bibby: Good morning. I want to ask a general question. We have talked about the importance of the UK-EU relationship and of the improvement in the relationship. The secretariat for the UK domestic advisory group is provided by the UK Government. How do you think that that set-up performs in terms of the relationships with all four nations? Here in the Scottish Parliament, we scrutinise matters from a Scottish perspective, but Wales, Northern Ireland and England make up the rest of the United Kingdom. From each of your perspectives, how do you feel that the current arrangement takes into account issues from each of the devolved nations in the UK?

The Convener: Léa Auffret, would you like to respond first? I am sorry—Tanja Buzek would like to comment.

Tanja Buzek: I apologise to Léa for jumping the queue.

We were very closely involved in the setting up of the domestic advisory groups. Of course, you have a unique situation with the nations and regions on the UK side. I understand that the Government reopened the call for members of the domestic advisory group in order to more properly reflect that situation.

A key argument—or rather, a key principle with the DAGs that we have on the EU side, of which we now have 12, is that it is always a balanced representation. Unfortunately, that was not in the final text of the TCA, but it is important that the groups have good, balanced representation of each of the regions or nations.

I am connecting to the meeting from the Council. I have just reported to the trade policy committee here on the domestic advisory groups, and there was a question about the support and facilities that we get.

Having an independent secretariat is of the utmost importance. On the EU side, we have the added advantage of the fact that the European Economic and Social Committee—the EESC—provides the secretariat for all the EU domestic advisory groups. The emphasis is that the EESC is not Government but civil society. As a secretariat, it is not instructed by the Commission or any member state. It is a completely independent human resource that improves the quality of our work tremendously.

I wanted to make a linkage. It is important not only for the composition of the DAG to include members from the UK regions and nations, and the various groups, but for the DAGs to be supported in their day-to-day work. That extends to very practical matters, such as funding. The EU domestic advisory groups receive limited funding for members to travel—they even receive funding to come to Brussels. I understand that you face the same challenge, because if meetings take place in London or Edinburgh, not everyone will be available at the same time, even if we use remote settings.

It is also important to have financial support for what we might call the operational functioning of the DAG, not to mention for people who attend the joint meetings. Even though I regularly take the Eurostar, it is not a long journey. For example, it is not as long as the journey will be when we travel to Korea in September. However, members will still need substantial support to enable them to travel. It must not come to down to a situation where only member organisations that can afford

to do so are members of the domestic advisory group. The aim should be to have a competent group, and then to get additional funding and support from the institution on the Government side. I just wanted to make it plain that, not only from our experience, it took up a lot of space in our DAG to DAG collaboration. I apologise for taking that turn.

The Convener: Thank you. Mr Bibby, where would you like to direct your question to next?

Neil Bibby: I do not know whether anyone else has any further thoughts on that. Perhaps Luísa Santos or Léa Auffret could say more from their perspectives.

Léa Auffret: I echo what Tanja Buzek has just said about the importance of having an independent secretariat. It is important for us, too, to receive input from the European Commission on what it would like us to do. However, we remain completely free to design our work as we want to and to use the tone that we want to adopt, especially for the joint statements of the domestic advisory group. Those are also an important political signal for leaders to drive a more progressive and positive relationship. Therefore I would really insist on that aspect.

On the European side, it raises questions from the civil society perspective that there is a less independent secretariat on the UK side. From my personal perspective, the composition of the UK DAG was a bit surprising—as, notably, was the selection of the members. On issues relating to the consumer movement in the UK, there was the possibility for a group to attend but only because it was working on specific issues, namely energy. However, it was very surprising, for me at least, not to see other groups that had a more horizontal approach being members of the UK DAG. For instance, they were absent from discussions on co-operation on market surveillance, but they have a great relationship with the market surveillance authority. Northern Ireland is not represented among the national and regional groups on the consumer movement, which, at least from our side, is a bit surprising.

There is another point that I would like to bring to the committee's attention. We have the domestic advisory group, and we are here to look at the implementation of the trade and co-operation agreement. However, part of that agreement is the civil society forum that Tanja Buzek mentioned, which happens once a year. For me, that is really important because it is a moment when civil society organisations, whether they are from the private sector, the trade unions or NGOs, can better understand what is being discussed in the context of the EU-UK framework on trade and co-operation. The problem that we have seen is that there is an entry barrier to

attending that discussion, including from the UK side. For instance, last year, I was a bit surprised because members of the UK domestic advisory group could participate in and speak during the civil society forum, which is different from the position with the DAG. Observers could play a part, but they were not able to ask a question or make a point. I would say that that is a bit of a pity, because it reduces the scope of the discussion that we can have and the ability for groups that are not involved in day-to-day work on the trade and co-operation agreement to have a say and to raise important questions to help us to advance the relationship. That might be something to explore a bit more deeply in the future.

Luísa Santos: I would like to point out two additional aspects. First, it is a different domestic advisory group on the EU side from what we normally have on other trade agreements, because this domestic advisory group with the UK covers the whole of the agreement. That explains why, although, in the others, it is normally only the sustainability chapter that we have in our free trade agreement, that situation is a bit different.

That meant that, at the beginning, there was huge interest from business organisations in joining the EU domestic advisory group. I think that 74 or 77 business organisations were interested, and there was not really a selection. Even when European countries have regional organisations, it is not the same situation as there is in the UK, but we had a similar situation. Therefore, we had to organise the group to allow for balanced representation, as we now have with the 10-10-10 split. However, beyond the 10 that represent business, there are an additional 64 or 65 such organisations, which are in different sub-groups. We did that to ensure that the business group was not overwhelmingly represented in the DAG.

That was a very special exercise on the European side, particularly from the business community, because we had to find a way of organising ourselves. We are still trying to make sure that everything works and that people are not frustrated with the process because they are not able to be on the group constantly, as there is a difference between the organisations that are members of the DAG and the ones that are members of the sub-groups.

I agree with what Tanja Buzek said. We have a very specific structure on the EU side. The European Economic and Social Committee allows for a very balanced representation of the three groups, and it is a good platform to host the DAG. It is a fact that we have less interference from Governments in our work. That does not mean that they are not present or that we do not have

exchanges with them and the Commission, but we develop our work independently.

The Convener: You mentioned the PPA. The deputy convener and I sit as observers from Scotland on the PPA, although we are allowed to take part in the break-out sessions and to occasionally speak in the plenary sessions. What is your relationship like with the PPA? It has come out with some priorities, including youth mobility, and there was some movement from the Commission on that. How do you interact with the PPA?

You talked about a reset in Brussels and a reboot of relationships, and most of us think that there will be an opportunity for that later this year. You also mentioned big geopolitical issues such as the economy and the war in Ukraine. Many of the incoming members of the European Parliament who will sit on the PPA will not have worked with UK MEPs, and those relationships are diluted over time, so what is the best way of strengthening and building on those relationships come the autumn?

Luísa Santos: That is a very good question. I mentioned the PPA because we feel that there has not been enough of an exchange between it and the domestic advisory group. Such exchanges are important precisely because those are the two most important independent bodies that monitor the implementation of the agreement, so there should be more co-operation. For instance, we should be able to sit in on PPA meetings or at least be able to present what the DAG is doing to the PPA. That is important if we are talking about rebooting or resetting relationships.

This is definitely an area where we think that we need more co-operation, more structured dialogue and more exchanges between the two bodies. After all, in a lot of these things, we do have common objectives. It is important that we strengthen our voice vis-à-vis the two Governments and together show ourselves in a more co-ordinated way.

11:00

That is one aspect. The second aspect is, of course, what the European Parliament, and indeed the UK Parliament, will look like after elections. The big debate right now in Brussels is what the elections will mean for the European Parliament. We believe—and I know that this is like trying to foresee the future with a crystal ball—that there will have an increase in the right, and in some cases the extreme right. That is very clear, but we believe that the centre should still hold the majority.

However—and many commentators are not sure about this, and neither are we—a lot of this

will depend on how many people go and vote. We at BusinessEurope have run a big campaign at the European and national levels to get everyone to vote. We have a lot of young voters; in many countries, people are able to vote when they are 16, and nobody knows exactly if and how they will vote. That is going to determine a lot with regard to how the Parliament will be in the future and which political groups will be relevant. I still believe, though, that we will have a relatively stable group that will want to improve relations with the UK, and which will possibly be even more interested in developing a better relationship.

I will finish with this: one of the messages that is coming out more clearly now that we are at the end of this legislation is the importance of making competitiveness the key priority for the EU again. We are trying not to put into question the green deal or the digital and green transformation, but we must have the means to do those things smoothly, and therefore we need sufficient economic growth and strong and competitive companies. I think that it is going to be very much a motto for the future and it will, in my view, give rise to positive opportunities to have a more forthcoming agenda with the UK with regard to the review of the TCA.

The Convener: Thank you for that. Does Tanja Buzek or Léa Auffret want to come in on that?

Tanja Buzek: Thank you for the question, and I also thank Luísa Santos for raising this at the very beginning.

I shared your frustration when you talked about coming to the PPA and speaking only in the break-out sessions, because it was the same for me. I had the opportunity to speak up as chair of the DAG in the break-out session, but of course there was no other opportunity beyond that. I should highlight, though, the pure fact that I was invited there not as that chair but as a member of the European Economic and Social Committee. In fact, it was the president of the EESC who was invited, and I said, “If he goes, I am going along with him, because I am the chair of the DAG.” Now that Luísa Santos is the new chair, that same arrangement will not work, because she is not an EESC member. What I would say now—and I have been doing this a long time—would be, “When I speak, I speak in my capacity as the chair of the DAG.” The point is that I got the invitation through a different route.

I forgot to say this at the beginning, but there is sometimes a bit of a mix-up between the DAG and the EESC. I just want to clarify now that members of the domestic advisory group are not drawn from the EESC; the EESC is included, because I happen to be an EESC member as well as a member of the DAG. However, as Luísa has

already explained, we have so many other organisations that are non-EESC members.

It is a mixed body of civil society organisations, which apply to the Commission to become members. Plus, a number of seats are allocated to the EESC, and we become members together with our fellow DAG colleagues. Unfortunately, the mix-up also relates partly to the nations and regions, or the Committee of the Regions, and the role of the EESC in the PPA. Those bodies do not have the institutional role that, for instance, the DAG has.

We have created a lot of useful and important bodies, but we need to distinguish the various roles and hats that we wear. As Luísa Santos said, I hope that the incoming members have a lot of affinity for the UK or that, in order to be nominated, they must have a lot of experience—let us hope for that. We will definitely work as the DAG presidency and with our members to reach out to our PPA members in the new Parliament.

Even if we cannot do it officially, there is a good opportunity to strengthen the ties between the PPA members and the DAG, including on the UK side, so that your colleagues who attend the PPA meetings—as observers or in whatever capacity—reach out to the UK DAG beforehand and go with all the knowledge that it gives you as an update. You will then be very well prepared for the meetings. So, maybe we can do it the other way round, but we will keep pushing with joint statements for an official role for the DAG chair in the PPA and for regular exchange between the PPA co-chair and the EU DAG.

The Convener: That is helpful—thank you. I will give the final word to Léa Auffret, if she wants to come in.

Léa Auffret: I support what Luísa Santos and Tanja Buzek have just said on that dimension of the added value of talking to the UK DAG and the EU DAG. It is very important for the PPA to have a reality check on how the relationship is going on the ground. I really appreciate it when we have those meetings on the EU DAG or talk to our UK counterparts, because I then better understand what is working and not working in the relationship and can identify areas of progress. For the PPA, things will be complicated without having that discussion. It is important to have a more natural and automatic relationship, which is not really happening at the moment. That creates frustration in civil society, because people do not feel involved or listened to. As my colleague just said, it would be interesting to explore and develop that further.

The Convener: That exhausts our questions. I thank you all for your attendance. We are all waiting with bated breath to see what both sets of elections bring. Certainly, the committee engages

strongly with the UK DAG and I am sure, given what you have said today, that we will open that up to working further with you in our role in the Parliament. Thank you very much. On that note, I close this meeting.

Meeting closed at 11:08.

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The deadline for corrections to this edition is:

Monday 8 July 2024

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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