

## COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE BRIEFING NOTE

### King's Speech Debate

November 2023

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## Introduction

The Countryside Alliance welcomes the Government's commitment to delivering a strong economy, increased productivity and thriving communities. However, these cannot be achieved without recognising the vital role the countryside has to play. The countryside is key to boosting our productivity and addressing the challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss.

A successful rural economy is vital for maintaining a living and working countryside. Without it there would not be the rural communities and landscapes as we know them today. It is therefore essential that the people who live and work in the countryside can engage fully in the economic life of the country, especially in our transition to net zero.

There is much within the King's Speech that can benefit rural communities, but only if those policies are developed having fully assessed the needs of those communities and the impact of policy on the rural economy.

Below are the Countryside Alliance's comments on some of the measures announced in the King's Speech.

## Trade (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership) Bill

### ***The purpose of the Bill is to:***

Allow the UK to meet the international obligations it will assume upon accession as the first European member of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

### ***The main elements of the Bill are:***

- Giving CPTPP parties greater access to our government procurement market, in return for new market access into Canada, Japan, Peru, Malaysia and Brunei.
- Enhancing regulatory cooperation between the UK and CPTPP parties on conformity assessments.
- Aligning the UK's approach to geographical indications with those of other CPTPP parties.
- Expanding copyright protections so performers from CPTPP parties are covered, as UK performers will be when operating abroad.

## Countryside Alliance Position

- This Bill will largely be a pro forma exercise necessary to give effect to the political decision to join the CPTPP.
- It is essential, however, that in negotiating and implementing free trade agreements the Government avoids undermining the domestic agricultural sector and production standards by declining to accept the import and sale of goods, in particular foods, that it would be unlawful to produce in the same manner in the UK.
- We are concerned about the conclusion of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee in its report on the UK-Australia Free Trade Agreement that, "*In practice it*

*appears unlikely that food produced to lower animal welfare standards will enter the UK as a result of this deal. Given this, it is disappointing the deal did not go further on animal welfare and include more far-reaching provisions that would have shown greater global leadership in this area.”*

- Meat and products containing meat should only be labelled British if the animals were born, bred and slaughtered in the UK. For example, it should no longer be lawful for bacon to be labelled British because the pork meat from outside the UK was processed in the UK. We would support efforts to develop a comprehensive food labelling policy and extend mandatory country of origin labelling to lightly processed meats and some dairy products.
- In reforming the approach to geographical indicators the Government should seek to enhance protections for regional and speciality food and drink products, to celebrate the quality of British produce and support UK farmers and producers.

## **Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill**

### ***The purpose of the Bill is to:***

Create a new regulatory framework for digital markets to tackle consumer rip-offs, bad business practices and anti-competitive practices, including fake reviews and subscription traps.

### ***The main elements of the Bill are:***

- Establishing new rights over subscription contracts to give consumers more control over their spending, by making it harder for businesses to trap people in subscription contracts they no longer want.
- Enabling growing consumer harms to be tackled, such as fake reviews and, subject to consultation, drip pricing.
- Introducing new powers for the Competition and Markets Authority to act against bad business practices more quickly, without the need for lengthy court processes.
- Focusing the Competition and Market Authority’s attention in relation to merger control on transactions with the greatest potential to weaken competition, by amending the thresholds for merger review.
- Empowering the Competition and Markets Authority with more effective investigation and enforcement powers.
- Enabling the Competition and Markets Authority to designate a small number of the most powerful digital firms with strategic market status, entailing new rules and remedies on how they may treat consumers and other businesses.

## **Countryside Alliance Position**

- Our principal concern in relation to this Bill is that it should provide effective protections for businesses against malicious fake reviews posted by activists with an ideological, rather than commercial, motive. These have become a favoured tactic of fringe animal rights activists targeting rural businesses.

- The Countryside Alliance previously campaigned in support of amendments to the Online Safety Bill that would have helped protect these businesses by making the posting of a malicious fake review a criminal offence.
- Frustratingly, the Government could not be convinced to adopt these amendments, saying it would instead address the issue through this Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill.
- We are concerned that an approach based on consumer law will be insufficient to address the issue of malicious fake reviews posted by individuals based on ideological or personal hostility rather than an attempt to gain commercial advantage; these are the kind from which we believe rural businesses and those who run them deserve urgent protection. This Bill would, however, introduce new requirements on platforms, which could be helpful if framed effectively.
- The Alliance responded to the Government's recent consultation that included provisions in this Bill relating to fake reviews. We continue to urge the Government to recognise the specific issue of ideologically-motivated malicious fake reviews, and to define the regulations appropriately.
- Targeted businesses must be able to have these reviews swiftly removed and to restore their online reputation. Platforms should also be expected to enact personal (rather than merely account) bans on perpetrators, preventing them from continuing to post potentially abusive content and creating a deterrent effect.

## **Draft Rail Reform Bill**

### ***The purpose of the Bill is to:***

Reform and restructure the rail industry, including the creation of Great British Railways which will assume the Secretary of State's functions as the franchising authority.

### ***The main elements of the Bill are:***

- Bringing together the management of the network and the commissioning of passenger services into a new public rail body, Great British Railways, that is intended to put customers first and deliver efficiency by assuming the Secretary of State's franchising authority functions, so operational and infrastructure decisions can be made in a coordinated way.
- Enabling whole-system decision making to ease the roll-out of more convenient ticketing options and ways to pay.
- Creating the commercial conditions for private sector-led growth and simplifying the structure of the industry to allow it to be more responsive to changing passenger needs.
- Creating new licensing conditions relating to accessibility for disabled passengers and growing rail freight.

## **Countryside Alliance Position**

- This Bill is primarily about the establishment of Great British Railways and the associated restructuring of the rail industry. Its purposes in relation to improving the experience for

passengers are, however, potentially of benefit to people in rural communities who rely on rail services or could use them given an improved service.

- Transport costs are a major driver of the 'rural premium' faced by people who live in the countryside. Research we published in 2022 showed that rural households spend almost £800 a year more on fuel than people who live in urban areas, paying up to 6 pence per litre more for petrol. Defra figures also suggest rural life necessitates longer journeys, with an average travelling distance per resident at 5,767 miles in 2020, compared with 3,624 miles for urban dwellers and 4,334 miles across England as a whole.
- A more reliable and affordable rail service, underpinned by more flexible and convenient ticketing options, could reduce reliance on private transport in rural areas, and potentially allow residents to save money and boost their productivity.

### **Animal Welfare (Livestock Export) Bill**

#### ***The purpose of the Bill is to:***

Permanently ban the export of cattle, sheep, goats, pigs and horses for slaughter and fattening from Great Britain.

#### ***The main elements of the Bill are:***

- Fulfilling the Government's manifesto commitment to end excessively long journeys for slaughter and fattening by banning the live export of cattle, sheep, goats, pigs and horses.
- Ensuring animals are slaughtered domestically, in high welfare UK slaughterhouses and preventing the export to unknown and likely lower welfare slaughterhouse conditions.
- Continuing to permit live animal exports in other circumstances, for example for breeding and competitions, provided they are transported in line with welfare requirements.

### **Countryside Alliance Position**

- The Countryside Alliance supports the objective of reducing livestock travel time from point of production to slaughter for the sake of improving their welfare, but to achieve this we believe it would be most effective to support small, local abattoirs.
- We therefore welcome the Government's commitment, given earlier this year, that the Government will support these facilities by creating a £4 million Smaller Abattoir Fund that is scheduled to open by the end of the year.
- The Alliance has long campaigned for small abattoirs to get the recognition they deserve for the crucial role they play in the food supply chain. That role will only become more important if a ban on live animal exports is introduced.
- There has been a huge decline in small abattoirs in recent years, with the most recent estimates showing only 49 remain in England, Wales and Scotland. The Sustainable Food Trust has said that if closures continued at the current rate, none would be operating by 2030. We cannot have a situation arise where livestock travel excessively long journeys here in the UK because small abattoirs cannot be used for processing.

## **Economic Activities of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill**

### ***The purpose of the Bill is to:***

Ban public bodies from imposing their own boycotts, divestment, or sanctions campaigns against foreign countries.

### ***The main elements of the Bill are:***

- Banning public bodies from taking account of territorial considerations in a way that indicates moral or political disapproval of foreign state conduct when making procurement and investment decisions.
- Banning public bodies from publishing statements indicating that they intend to engage in boycott or divestment policies.
- Enabling enforcement activity to ensure that public bodies comply with the ban.

### **Countryside Alliance Position**

- This Bill aims to prevent local authorities and other public bodies from interfering in foreign affairs by implementing politically-motivated boycotts of goods and services connected with Israel. The Countryside Alliance accepts and agrees with the principle that public bodies should not be formulating independent policies on matters that are *ultra vires* for their level of authority.
- We believe, however, that this principle is equally applicable in other areas of policy.
- Proponents of a document styled as the 'Plant-Based Treaty' have been lobbying councils to adopt independent food and farming policies that directly discriminate against livestock farming, meat and dairy. Other organisations supporting this campaign, or otherwise attacking animal agriculture, include the Extinction Rebellion offshoot Animal Rising.
- The short title of this Bill explicitly refers to 'overseas matters' so it could not be amended to extend to areas of domestic policy. Nevertheless, we would support an application of this principle to food and farming policy – which is also *ultra vires* for local authorities – preventing them from engaging in attacks on Britain's dairy and livestock sectors based on dubious environmental arguments promoted by extreme activists.
- For the time being, the Countryside Alliance has led a fightback against this tendency by promoting motions that commit local authorities to supporting all local produce, including meat and dairy. To date, three local authorities have passed related motions.

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