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This is what a proper Brexit looks like

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In London yesterday we welcomed Maroš Šefčovič, EU trade commissioner, and Valdis Dombrovskis, EU economy and productivity commissioner. Their visit coincided with Kemi Badenoch and Nigel Farage signing up to a Daily Express campaign for a “proper Brexit”.

Now if a “proper Brexit” means building a successful trading relationship for the UK and the EU — one that tears away red tape, prioritises growth and works in practice for consumers and businesses — then I agree that it is a good idea. Sadly, though, I imagine that is not what those signatories — the hard Brexit architect and the (failed) custodian of the Brexit bonfire — really meant.

For once, though, I am happy to make use of the empty slogans that usually annoy me. We are seeing more of them as some politicians revert to the same 2016 patterns in EU discourse.

Readers will know that trade negotiations are complex and deserve better than arguments that invoke numbers on a big red bus. For too long we have had a Brexit that has been utterly miserable and anti-growth. Far from delivering freedom, the Conservative deal made UK businesses surrender to invasive bureaucracy.

Take, for example, the evidence of Toby Ovens at the business and trade select committee. The managing director at Broughton Transport, a familyrun UK logistics company, held up a single sheet of paper. This is what, a decade ago, he would fill out to export goods to the EU. Now, it is two dozen pages, on which he counted out twenty-six stamps. Worse still, this was just one of the three certificates that accompanied one of his trailers at the border. A stamp out of place means rejection for the whole truckload.

Our high-quality British beef and lamb, part of a meat export market worth £1.6bn, are a source of national pride. Yet this produce will rot in a fridge should a stamp be a few centimetres out of place. This is the frustrating, self-defeating reality. These aren't theoretical problems; around 223,000 British companies traded goods with the EU in 2024. Unnecessary paperwork is stifling their success.

I doubt this is the outcome that Brexit architects wanted or even expected. But it was a choice made by those who negotiated the Brexit deal. In thrall to ideology, they were not driven by what works. A ruthlessly pragmatic approach is needed to reset the UK-EU relationship. That means being honest with voters in two ways. First, detailed negotiations always take time. Second, in that process, there are temptations to reach beyond what is realistic or deliverable.

But we cannot create our own version of the red bus promise.

Rather, we will focus on where there are real advantages for people: food, drink, and carbon trading. The total value of food, drink and carbon trading deals will be worth £9bn a year to our economy by 2040. Slashing red tape will make it easier to export to the EU — our biggest trading partner.

Morrisons' chief executive Rami Baitiéh has said that “sweeping away trade barriers with the EU promises to ease a source of pressure on food prices and is therefore good news for shoppers”.

Other supermarkets have made similar statements.

The prime minister has said that “if it is in our national interest to have even closer alignment with the single market, then we should consider that”. Šefčovič and I have agreed to work towards negotiating the UK's participation in the EU's internal electricity market: good for consumers, businesses and investment in the North Sea.

This is about negotiating where it makes sense, enabling us to deliver benefits now, while sticking to our manichiller festo promises of not rejoining the single market or the customs union or reintroducing freedom of movement.

The UK is making a sovereign choice to align with another high standards jurisdiction — the EU — because it is in our economic interests to do so. What guides me in the negotiating room is what works for the haulier, the exporter, the price of the weekly shop, rather than obsessing about inflexible ideology that helps no one.

International events in recent weeks have also given us the starkest of reminders that economic co-operation is not an addendum to security co-operation but an essential part of it.

You cannot have security without prosperity. And prosperity will be driven by removing the unnecessary barriers that hold our great businesses — small, medium and large — back. It's about building a strong trading relationship for the future: a new strategic partnership. You could call it a proper Brexit.