

# Biden Tears Up Johnson's Mythical US-UK Trade Deal

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**You can't say the UK was not warned.**

As the Johnson Government stands on the Deal or No Deal cliff edge with the European Union, US President-elect Joe Biden signalled last week, "I'm not going to enter any new trade agreement with anybody until we have made major investments here at home and in our workers and in education."

Although he did not refer specifically to a US-UK trade agreement, Biden drove home the point in an interview with Thomas Friedman of [The New York Times](#): "I want to make sure we're going to fight like hell by investing in America first," listing sectors such as energy, biotech, advanced materials, and artificial intelligence.

It wasn't quite Barack Obama's "back of the queue" caution to the UK just before the 2016 Brexit referendum, but it didn't need to be.

There is no queue. And if there was any reserved seat in Washington for the UK on January 1 for trade discussions, it has now been taken away — after the Johnson Government wiped its feet on it.

## **Johnson's Costly Defiance**

In April 2019, US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi [addressed the Irish Dail](#) in Dublin, "Let me be clear, if the Brexit deal undermines the Good Friday Accord, there will be no chance of a US-UK trade agreement."

Hers was not an individual statement.

Rep. Richard Neal, chair of the powerful House Ways and Means Committee, [echoed the message](#), as he stood alongside Pelosi on the

border between Ireland's Donegal and Northern Ireland's Derry. So did the rest of the delegation.

Boris Johnson was outside the Government at that point. With the support of Donald Trump's advisors, he [was implementing his plan](#) to replace May in 10 Downing Street.

But 17 months later, Prime Minister Johnson not only challenged Pelosi, Neal, and the other US legislators. He defied them, and the Irish Government, by taking away the assurances over the Irish border.

On 7 September 2020, the Government tabled the UK Internal Market Bill setting aside provisions of the Withdrawal Agreement with the European Union, including the customs line "down the Irish Sea" between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

The line had been essential for Johnson and the EU to reach an accord, as it removed the prospect of a "hard border" between Ireland and Northern Ireland. But the Prime Minister made clear that he did not feel bound by it: campaigning for the December 2019 General Election, he brazenly declared that the customs provision did not exist.

Now his Government was turning that fiction into a law-breaking reality. Northern Ireland Secretary Brandon Lewis told the [House of Commons on 8 September](#) that the Internal Market Bill was illegal in a "specific and limited way".

Two days, [Pelosi's reaction was specific](#) but far from limited in its significance: "The Good Friday Agreement is the bedrock of peace in Northern Ireland and an inspiration for the whole world.

"Whatever form it takes, Brexit cannot be allowed to imperil the Good Friday Agreement, including the stability brought by the invisible and frictionless border between the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland.

"The UK must respect the Northern Ireland Protocol as signed with the EU to ensure the free flow of goods across the border.

If the UK violates that international treaty and Brexit undermines the Good Friday accord, there will be absolutely no chance of a US-UK trade agreement passing the Congress. The Good Friday Agreement is treasured by the American people and will be proudly defended in the United States Congress.”

[Biden followed](#) on 16 September, endorsing a bipartisan letter from legislators to Johnson: “We can’t allow the Good Friday Agreement that brought peace to Northern Ireland to become a casualty of Brexit.

“Any trade deal between the US and UK must be contingent upon respect for the Agreement and preventing the return of a hard border. Period.”

In a [post-election call to Biden](#), the Prime Minister posed as the arsonist saying that he might put out the fire. In the words of a British official: “They talked about the importance of implementing Brexit in such a way that upholds the Good Friday Agreement. The PM assured the President-elect that would be the case.”

Biden’s transition team left no doubt about their emphasis: “The President-elect expressed his interest in cooperating with the UK, NATO, and the EU on shared Trans-Atlantic priorities, and reaffirmed his support for the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland.”

## **Goodwill Gone**

On Tuesday, the UK Government retreated from the Internal Market Bill and returned to the customs line, even as Cabinet Office Minister [Michael Gove](#) said, “I don’t think there’s a border in the Irish Sea.”

But for American legislators, Johnson burned up most of his political capital in September with the ill-judged threat to the Irish border provisions. Their attachment to the Good Friday Agreement, and the culturally-power notion of “Irish heritage”, is increasingly bolstered by the calculation that Dublin is a much more reliable partner than London — particularly as Ireland leads into the EU whereas post-Brexit Britain leads nowhere.

There are still deep institutional links, going back to World War II, between the [US and UK Government](#). But those links, in areas such as intelligence and security, will also be threatened by a message British divorce from Europe. And the preliminary US-UK trade talks in 2018-2019 even if they weren't quite the "takeover of the NHS and chlorinated chicken for all" portrayed by opponents — set out a series of complex issues that will take years for resolution, whether or not there is a UK-EU deal.

In mid-October, as negotiators prepared for a fifth round of talks, US Trade Representative [Robert Lighthizer](#) proclaimed that there will be a trade deal reasonably soon.

But Lighthizer will be gone on January 20, as will Trump officials like Peter Navarro who saw Brexit as a vehicle to weaken and even break up the European Union.

So the Johnson Government is scrambling to make amends with Biden. International Trade Secretary [Liz Truss said](#) on Wednesday that tariffs on US goods, imposed after the World Trade Organisation ruled Washington unlawfully subsidised the aircraft manufacturer Boeing, will be scrapped on January 1 to "deepen our trading relationship with the US".

The gesture is probably too late. For the adults entering the room in Washington, it is the UK that broke the furniture. And it is the UK that can sit in the corner while other matters are addressed.