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Watchdog supposed to scrutinise Australia trade deal still will not exist when deal is signed

Exclusive: Liz Truss accused of ‘subverting’ commitment to parliament by blocking access to agreement until autumn

Rob Merrick Deputy Political Editor | @Rob_Merrick | Saturday 05 | 161 comments



The trade secretary has yet to begin the search for members of the Trade and Agriculture Commission (Reuters)



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A watchdog designed to ensure **the Australia trade deal** does not undermine UK food and animal welfare rules will not be set up until months after it is signed, it has emerged.

Liz Truss, the trade secretary, is accused of **breaking a commitment to MPs and farmers** by shelving scrutiny until the autumn – when it is feared it will be too late to make any changes.

The formation of the Trade and Agriculture Commission (TAC) was conceded by the government last year, after protests that the rush to strike post-**Brexit** deals threatens to breach standards and hurt farmers.

It was expected to be in place by the spring or early summer – as the Australia talks accelerated – to scrutinise the deal as it is being negotiated and assess the implications for shoppers, agriculture and the climate.

Instead, the hunt for members has yet to even begin and *The Independent* has learnt the TAC will not be allowed to view the agreement until after a “legal scrub”, probably in the autumn.

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The delay has “alarmed” Tim Smith, the **head of a temporary commission** which was wound up in March, who has also criticised a refusal to involve the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland governments in the talks.



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The criticism was echoed by Neil Parish, the Conservative chair of the Commons environment committee, who accused the government of “wasting time”.

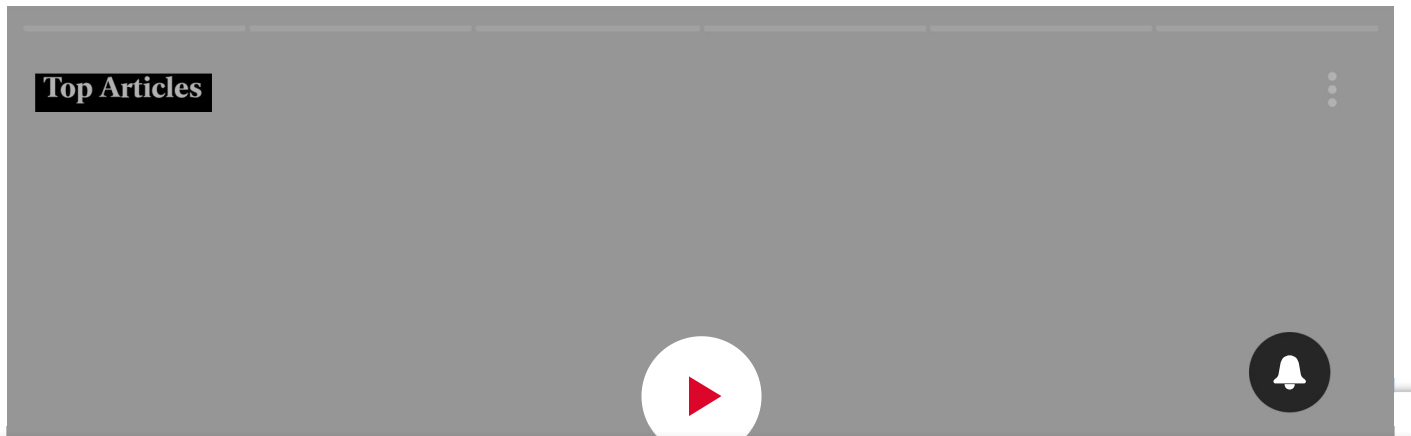
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“Parliament cannot be unsighted on the principles of the deal, as it will be too late to make any amendments once the deal is put to the Commons,” he told *The Independent*.



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The **National Farmers Union** has warned “the clock is ticking”, adding: “As we are so close to finalising these deals, its critical the TAC is set up urgently so that it can prepare in good time for the vital job of scrutinising”.

And **Emily Thornberry**, Labour’s shadow trade secretary, called for the looming agreement with Australia to be blocked until the government changed course.

The deal – offering Canberra zero-tariff, zero-quota terms, despite farmers’ fears of ruin from cheap and lower-quality meat imports – is expected to be sealed immediately after next weekend’s **G7 summit** in Cornwall.

“This is no longer just a case of Liz Truss avoiding the verdict of the Trade and Agriculture Commission on the sell-out offer she has made to Australia,” Ms Thornberry told *The Independent*.

“She is actively subverting the statutory role that the commission has been given by parliament to inform scrutiny of such trade deals. That is an unacceptable breach of the commitments made.”

Anger has been fuelled by Ms Truss’s failure to respond to March’s report by the temporary commission, with 22 recommendations on everything from animal welfare and labour standards to the climate crisis and food labelling. 

Mr Parish has demanded that Ms Truss explain the delay, adding: “It is essential we get a response from the government regarding the TAC’s report as soon as possible.”

The Department for International Trade declined to respond to the criticisms, but it is understood to believe the TAC – enshrined in the Agriculture Act – doe 

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“It is about putting British farming at the heart of our trade agenda and ensuring the interests of farmers and consumers are promoted and advanced,” the trade secretary promised.

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