
Muted industry welcome for May's Brexit white paper - little mention of haulage

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A divided government notwithstanding, the response from the freight industry to UK prime minister Theresa May's Brexit proposals has largely been positive.

Announced yesterday in a white paper, the proposals include a facilitated customs arrangement, removing the need for customs checks between the EU and UK.

"At the core of the UK's proposal is the establishment by the UK and the EU of a free-trade area for goods," says the white paper.

"This would avoid friction at the border and ensure both sides meet their commitments to Northern Ireland and Ireland through the overall future relationship."

It adds: "It would protect the uniquely integrated supply chains and just-in-time processes that have developed across the UK and the EU over the last 40 years, and will remain important given our geographical proximity, and the jobs and livelihoods dependent on them."

Deputy chief executive of the Freight Transport Association (FTA) James Hookham said the proposals offered "encouragement".

However, he warned there were still areas of concern requiring "urgent" attention if trading between the EU and UK is to continue without major disruption.

"The devil's always in the detail, and while we recognise government efforts to address the needs of logistics, there is still much we need to understand on the practicalities," he added.

Mr Hookham highlighted the lack of clarity on how road transport would operate following the UK's exit from the EU. Other than noting that the government was exploring options for "reciprocal access", the paper says very little on haulage.

"A permit system is briefly mentioned, but this is not an option if the thousands of movements to and from the EU are to continue with minimal delays," Mr Hookham said.

“There is no point in having the most facilitated customs agreement in the world if a permits quota means trucks cannot move goods freely across borders.”

He also called for greater clarity on the status of skilled EU workers, noting that 45,000 European HGV drivers were currently working in the UK. The loss of this workforce would leave the UK’s supply chain “severely exposed”, he said, adding that employers needed “reassurance” on this front.

The British International Freight Association (BIFA) also gave the paper a muted welcome, director general Robert Keen describing it as “the most comprehensive and cogent proposal put forward by the UK government to date and a useful basis for negotiation with the EU”.

He added: “The white paper addresses some of the issues BIFA has highlighted over the past two years, including retaining something as close to the Single Market and Customs Union as is possible, with positive ideas on future customs matters and international trading arrangements.”

But he cautioned: “We have to remember that nothing in the white paper is cast in stone.

“The proposals on customs, where the UK is proposing to apply EU tariffs to EU goods passing through the UK, while having the freedom to set different tariffs on goods entering the UK, look complex and untested, something that has already seen negative comment from the EU.

“Other than a facilitated customs arrangement, I suspect that there will be other areas where there will be differences of opinion between the UK and EU.”

Chief executive of UK Major Ports Group Tim Morris described the paper as a “welcome step”, saying the “practical proposals” benefited not just ports but the whole economy.

“The focus on ensuring and improving the flow of trade – both with the EU and the rest of the world – is one that the UK’s major ports very much support if realised,” said Mr Morris.

Support for the proposals also came from the UK Chamber of Shipping, with director of policy David Balston noting that government had listened to industry’s “concerns”.

While Mr Balston had nothing but praise for Ms May, he demanded the EU “got serious”, adding that it needed to stop being a “prisoner of its own dogma”.

He added: “The UK is being constructive, collaborative and realistic, and if the EU

dismisses these proposals, as it has previous iterations, or tries to push the UK even further, then the risk of a no-deal Brexit will rise dramatically.

“If that comes to pass, it will be because of their intransigence, and they should be under no illusions: no-deal would significantly damage the EU’s economy as well as the UK’s.”

(By Alexander Whiteman, The LoadStar)