

The Tories know they are wilfully harming business, and...

Published: January 16, 2026, 11:50 pm

As the [Guardian](#) reported yesterday evening:

Michael Gove has told businesses that trade with Europe they need to prepare for “significant change” with “inevitable” border checks for “almost everybody” who imports from the EU from next year.

In the first official confirmation that the government is going to impose trade barriers post-Brexit, he warned there would be checks on food and goods of animal origin, plus customs declarations and mandatory safety and security certificates required for all imports.

“You have to accept we will need some friction. We will minimise it but it is an inevitability of our departure,” he told delegates at a Cabinet Office event held in central London on Monday, entitled Preparing Our Border for the Future Relationship.

This is extraordinary. What it says is that the government is deliberately creating costs for business, which must inevitably be passed on to customers in due course.

And what it also says is that there is a real cost to the government's policies, which it is knowingly imposing. For evidence, we need only look at the freeport consultation, to which I [referred yesterday](#). In the [consultation document](#) the government says:

In the Ancient World, Greek and Roman ships — piled high with traders’ wines and olive oils — found safe harbour in the Free Port of Delos, a small Greek island in the waters of the Aegean. Offering respite from import taxes in the hope of attracting the patronage of merchants, the Delosian model of a ‘Free Port’ has rarely been out of use since.

Because Freeports still offer that same story of trade and prosperity across the modern world. From the UAE to the USA, China to California, global Freeports support jobs, trade and investment. They serve as humming hubs of high-quality manufacturing, titans of trans- shipment and warehouses for wealth-creating goods and services.

The UK will recreate the best aspects of international Freeports in the brand-new,

best-in-class, bespoke model set out in the following pages.

We want Freeports to boost trade, jobs and investment. That's why we're cutting red tape by streamlining customs processes, exploring the use of planning measures to speed up planning processes and accelerate development and housing delivery in and around Freeports, and consulting on a comprehensive set of tax breaks to support businesses.

The paradox could not be more obvious. The government claims that red tape, customs operations, tariffs and the associated bureaucracy create impediments to trade in their freeport consultation. And for the vast majority of the grade in this country that is exactly what they are going to impose.

I have said before that we will need to rename red tape as blue tape in the future. Of all the things I never expected to witness after all the years I have heard Tories berate government-imposed admin was a Conservative government going out of its way to impose the maximum possible admin cost on trade and business, and all without any obvious reason for doing so. But that is what is happening. And quite bizarrely, this is what people apparently chose in December.

Labour really does need to get its act together on this issue. Never has it been gifted such a chance before. But will it have the will, or ability, to take it?