

# The UK-Australia Trade Deal - A Tale of Brexit Insanity



Prime Minister Boris Johnson in April 2020. Photo: PA Images

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## **Otto English dissects the disadvantages that a free trade agreement between the two countries would bring to the UK**

Let me tell you the story of the proposed Australian-UK free trade deal. A tale so mad that once you get to the end of it, you will probably find yourself banging your head against the table in front of you in despair. So perhaps don a bicycle helmet before we proceed.

Ready? Good – let's go.

Now, you might, very reasonably, think that you have better things to do than to read about the Australian-UK free trade deal. There's probably a wall of paint somewhere that you would perhaps rather watch dry or a sock drawer to

rearrange. But the tale serves as a fascinating and depressing illustration of where the UK is currently at with regards to Brexit, international trade, and international relations and the Government doesn't really want you to scrutinize things. It wants you to go along with the optics and question nothing.

Let's deal with the numbers first of all.

Whatever you might have been told – or believed – about the 'failing EU project', it is the world's second-largest economy and still, by far, the UK's biggest trading partner. In 2019, the UK's exports to the EU were worth £294 billion and accounted for 43% of all of our outward trade. Since leaving the EU, that figure has dipped, fairly dramatically, but it remains our biggest market and is usefully on our doorstep, so that makes sense.

Unfortunately, all of this poses something of an existential crisis for the Brexiters. Because leaving the EU, after all, was in part about 'making trade deals with the rest of the world'. And, for some, like the Peruvian-born former Conservative MEP, Daniel Hannan, it was about reconnecting with the neglected Commonwealth and regaining our place as a top player in the world.

And that's why Australia matters.

British people like Australia. Opinion polls consistently rank it in the top three of Britons' favourite nations alongside Canada and New Zealand. When you say 'Australia' to Brits, they think of warm seas, sandy beaches, barbecues, and nice wine; Kylie Minogue, clean-cut soap operas, and the comedy stylings of Dame Edna Everage. Australia also features the UK's flag on its flag, has our Queen on its money, and drives on the left. Australians speak our language and many – but by no means all – of them are descended from British settlers. Hannan calls them our "kinsmen".

Boris Johnson needs a Brexit win – and Australia, a nation so beloved of British people, looks like the obvious candidate. It ticks all the boxes and makes for some great *Sun* front-page spreads. But there is a problem. Actually, there is a whole Pandora's box of problems.

No deal can replace the one that the UK had with the EU. That's not 'Remoaner' talk, it is plain and obvious fact. And the Government knows that and its friendly stable of tamed tabloid journalists – who pretend otherwise – know that too. It is

essential to both camps that you and I don't work it out – that we are kept in ignorance and instead cheer 'huzzah' for the thin gruel on offer.

The free trade agreement with Australia is about optics and, yes, about tapping into those Hannan-esque yearnings for a world in which Britain headed a great big Empire and was top dog. Daniel Hannan and his fellow travellers believe in something called CANZUK, a fetishist nonsense in which Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and the UK unite in a trade deal and sing *Rule, Britannia!* – or something.

It is not rooted in logic or economic reality – but in whimsy and fantasy. And, in that, we have the Great British Brexit summed up.

For, at the end of the day, none of this makes sense and none of this benefits any of us. Not even the most credulous Brexit believer. It is the politics of Johnsonism – a philosophy predicated on serving the ego and career of the Prime Minister and his acolytes.

The Government needs a trade deal with Australia because it needs a Brexit win. It needs to fuel the fantasy, much as the Aztecs believed that they needed to fuel the Sun with human sacrifice lest their whole world would fall apart. Logic and sanity play no part as long as it thinks it can get away with it – and the Government believes that it can. Depressingly, I think it's probably right.

Now: permission to bang your head on that table.

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