

First I Was Interviewed by MPs. Then I Was Banned from Argentina. This Is Why Trade Democracy Matters

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I started yesterday presenting evidence to [UK] parliament's international trade committee, and I finished it by having my accreditation to next week's WTO summit withdrawn. Both events relate to the same issue: the lack of power we as citizens have over trade policy.

Trade isn't just some technical issue that matters to 'experts'. It's about food standards, workers' rights and environmental protections. It's about how we run public services and whether we can afford essential medicines.

Yesterday morning I was invited to tell the trade committee [what Global Justice Now thinks about the Trade Bill](#), which was introduced into parliament two weeks ago. I told them that it lacked any process for allowing the public, or even them as MPs, to have control over the government's trade policy.

As [Liam Fox flies](#) around the world talking trade to governments from Saudi to the US, Brazil to the Philippines, [neither \[Britain's\] parliament nor the public has a right to know what he's talking about or to whom](#). There doesn't have to be any consultation or impact assessment. When he's completed his talks, and signed a trade deal, MPs can't amend it or stop it. If they're lucky, they might just get a debate.

That matters, because we know that trade policy increasingly affects more and more aspects of our lives. We know a trade deal with the US would change UK food standards – GM food, chlorine chicken and hormone beef – because the [US commerce secretary told us](#) before that last round of talks. We also know the British government remains committed to tighter intellectual property (read: more expensive medicines around the world) and a strong [e-commerce agenda](#) (read: more power to Google, Amazon and Facebook). But we can't do much about it until we get a proper democratic process for agreeing trade deals.

I was really heartened that we weren't alone yesterday in our concerns. Business representatives and lawyers agreed that the Trade Bill wasn't up to scratch and that scrutiny mechanisms were laughable. We got a sympathetic hearing from MPs of all parties on the committee. We must amend this bill.

Two hours later the World Trade Organisation (WTO) got in touch. The 11th WTO summit is being held in ten days in Buenos Aires and our delegation was given accreditation two months ago. Only at the last minute, [it was being rescinded at the request of Argentina's new government](#). Despite repeated requests for more information, the government couldn't

tell us why.

We are not alone. Trade activists from across Europe, Latin America, Africa have also had their accreditation rescinded at the last minute.

This is the first time in 15 years that such draconian action has been taken to prevent civil society having a voice at the WTO. It is unprecedented for a democratic government to take such a step.

This is important because the WTO effectively sets trade rules for the whole world. Those rules have a fundamental impact – too often negative – on poverty, inequality and the environment. Thanks to the role of campaigners, we have often prevented dangerous new deals being completed, and have stood up to rich country governments, who over the years have been outrageously hypocritical in the rules they've set for trade in, for instance, agricultural products. It is still the case that developing countries are challenged for very modest protection of food and small farmers, while rich country protection takes place on a massive scale.

At this WTO, rich countries will again move to close down the so-called 'development agenda', where there is at least the rhetoric of fighting poverty and unfairness, towards new issues like e-commerce and investment, which is all about benefitting their big businesses. If we're not there, it strengthens their hand. There will also be huge fights between the US and China, with Trump trying to rip up any sort of multinational rules in favour of the 'rule of the bully'.

Why has Argentina taken this action? Because it has a government [committed to privatisation and austerity](#), who want to use the WTO to show that Latin America is 'open for business' and the days of the so-called '[pink tide](#)' are over. This means taking an increasingly authoritarian approach to protest and campaigning. In Buenos Aires, the government's policies will be opposed on the streets by many thousands of people. The banning of international campaigners suggests that they will take a very heavy handed approach to these protests.

Around the world, governments are cracking down on any form of democracy in trade policy. No wonder, given that trade deals today go to the heart of how our society is run. A crackdown on our rights to debate, to amend, and to oppose trade policy is an attack on our ability to decide what kind of world we want to live in. Banned or not, we will not give up because this work has never been more important.

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