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Letter: Plea to WTO: please retain ban on ecommerce tariffs

From Christine Bliss and others

5 April 2024
8 HOURS AGO

In “Ecommerce tariffs will kick in from 2026, says WTO chief” (Report, March 27) Andy Bounds reports on the decision of World Trade Organization ministers to end the moratorium on customs duties on electronic transmissions in 2026.

He quotes the WTO director-general’s comments that “it sends a signal to business on what they need to do. Two years is a very reasonable timeframe.”

These comments undervalue the importance to worldwide businesses of all kinds — large and small — of the current moratorium as a clear, uninterrupted, multilateral ban on such customs duties. At the recent WTO ministerial conference, its benefits were highlighted in a global statement backed by as many as 211 business organisations worldwide, many of them representing digitally delivered services.

Neither does the recent ministerial decision need to be taken as final. Like previous such decisions, it noted the moratorium’s extension period and its expiry date. But that does not preclude ministers — and the decision is theirs alone — from deciding to extend it.

Recent years have seen indisputable growth in international trade that is digitally dependent, ranging from international corporations with global reach to the first forays of micro businesses into export trade, using digital platforms to offer their goods and services online and take payment for them online.

The WTO moratorium has been one important factor in this fundamentally beneficial development for both producers and consumers. It is the only accepted WTO provision applying explicitly to all electronic commerce, and has underpinned a stable, predictable, and duty-free environment for all online trade to thrive.

Ending the moratorium would not just be a matter of a two-year adaptation period. It would mean a fundamental global disruption of business models, potentially destabilising the trend in inclusive global wealth creation that has come through enhanced market access using digital technologies.

It would be more than ironic for the WTO to be the instrument for such a trade-restrictive step. Businesses will rightly continue to press for a permanent ban on customs duties on electronic transmissions.

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