

The government's planned U.K.-EU alignment bill may prove to be the most consequential piece of Brexit-era legislation since the European Union (Withdrawal) Act itself. Introduced quietly, couched in technical language and still deliberately vague, it represents not a dramatic reversal of Brexit but something arguably more significant: the institutionalisation of a new, long-term relationship in which Britain edges closer to the EU's regulatory orbit while insisting—politically, if not always practically—that sovereignty remains intact.

At its core, the bill would create a legal framework enabling the U.K. to align with EU rules across a wide range of policy areas, from food standards and animal welfare to electricity markets and carbon trading. This is not alignment in the abstract. It would allow future EU laws in agreed sectors to flow into the U.K. statute book, potentially automatically, subject to a British veto in specific cases. In effect, it builds a standing mechanism for regulatory convergence—something previous governments avoided for fear of appearing to reverse Brexit by stealth.

That fear has not vanished. The political sensitivity explains why ministers stress that “the exact form the powers will take has not yet been decided,” and why anonymity still shrouds official briefings. But the direction of travel is clear. The U.K.-EU “reset” is moving beyond diplomatic tone and technical cooperation toward something more structural: a shared regulatory space in key economic and environmental areas.

This is less surprising than it sounds. Since leaving the EU, Britain has struggled to make regulatory divergence pay. Promised freedoms have produced few tangible benefits, while divergence itself has imposed real costs—particularly on agrifood exporters, energy traders, and firms operating across borders. Alignment, once portrayed as a trap, now looks increasingly like a lubricant for trade, investment, and cooperation.

The agrifood deal under negotiation illustrates this logic. Food standards and animal welfare rules are among the most sensitive and politically charged areas of Brexit. Yet they are also

where friction has been most economically damaging. If the U.K. wants smoother access to EU markets—and fewer checks at borders—it must accept a degree of shared rule-making. The same is true of electricity markets and emissions trading, where interconnected systems reward cooperation and punish isolation.

The proposed bill would therefore do something subtle but profound. Instead of renegotiating alignment sector by sector, government by government, it would normalise the process. It would embed alignment into the machinery of governance, extending it not just to Whitehall but to devolved administrations as well. That matters. Brexit unsettled the U.K.'s internal constitutional balance, particularly in areas like agriculture and the environment, which are devolved domestically but Europeanised in practice. A common framework for EU alignment could help restore coherence—though it may also reopen debates about consent and autonomy in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

Critics will argue that this amounts to “dynamic alignment” under another name: rule-taking without representation. They will point to the prospect of EU laws transferring automatically into U.K. law and ask what, exactly, was gained by leaving. The government's answer rests on two claims. First, that Britain would retain a veto, preserving ultimate sovereignty. Second, that it would have “decision-shaping rights” in Brussels when new rules are being developed.

Both claims deserve scrutiny. A veto sounds reassuring, but in practice it is a blunt and politically costly tool. Refusing to align in one area could jeopardise access or cooperation in others. Over time, the pressure to conform may be less legal than economic and diplomatic. Meanwhile, “decision-shaping” falls well short of decision-making. Britain can influence, advise, and lobby—but not vote. That is a familiar position for non-EU states closely integrated with the bloc, and it is a stable one. But it is not sovereignty as Brexit campaigners once defined it.

Supporters of the bill would counter that this is the point. Brexit, they argue, was never a binary choice between isolation and domination. It was about restoring the right to choose alignment when it suits national interests. From this perspective, a structured, transparent framework for choosing alignment is more sovereign than ad hoc divergence driven by ideology rather than evidence. The real loss of control, they would say, comes from pretending that Britain can shape continental markets while standing apart from their rules.

There is also a political economy argument. The government estimates that the reset will be worth £9 billion to the U.K. economy by 2040. Such long-term projections are always contestable, but the direction is plausible. Reduced trade friction, integrated energy markets, and linked carbon trading systems all promise efficiency gains. For a government focused on growth, alignment is not a concession but a tool.

Yet politics, not economics, will determine the bill's fate. Introducing it in spring or summer suggests careful timing. The government will want to avoid framing it as a grand constitutional moment. Instead, it is likely to be presented as technical, pragmatic, and limited—just another piece of legislation to make Brexit work better. Whether that framing survives parliamentary scrutiny is another matter.

Backbenchers wary of reopening Brexit wounds will push for strong parliamentary oversight, echoing Nick Thomas-Symonds' assertion that parliament will "rightly have a say." That phrase may become the bill's central battleground. What does a meaningful parliamentary say look like when alignment is ongoing and potentially automatic? Will MPs vote on each new tranche of EU rules, or merely on the framework that enables them? Too much scrutiny risks paralysis; too little invites accusations of executive overreach.

Ultimately, the bill exposes an uncomfortable truth: Brexit did not end Britain's relationship with EU law; it merely changed how that relationship is managed. For years, governments tried to pretend otherwise, clinging to the symbolism of divergence while quietly aligning

where necessary. This legislation would replace that improvisation with structure. In doing so, it acknowledges what businesses, regulators, and diplomats have long known—that geography and interdependence still matter.

Whether voters accept this quieter, more technocratic settlement remains to be seen. For some, any return to alignment will feel like betrayal. For others, it will look like overdue realism. The bill does not reverse Brexit, but it does mark the end of the fantasy that Britain could permanently stand apart from the rules governing its largest trading partner. The real question is not whether the U.K. will align with the EU, but how honestly and democratically it chooses to do so.