

Time for Defra to use our freedoms from the EU

The Defra website is more of a history lesson than a celebration of new opportunities and freedoms for farmers. Instead of brimming over with the changes they want to make to our fishing and farming policies now we can control them, it faithfully records the EU laws, rules and old schemes that dominated us for so long. It tells us there is a Countryside Productivity scheme offering only small grants funded by the EU, but goes on to say it is closed. It tells us there were forestry, Water, waste and food productivity schemes but these are also all closed.

It is true it does also now set out more recent U.K. schemes of support but most of these are for environmental improvements. Some of its latest initiatives in wilding and nature look like UK versions of work being done in the EU. Some are worthwhile but the overall impression given is the Department wants less land available for food production and has not yet got round to offering positive support for better farming to boost our output.

You could of course say why not leave it all to the market? There are two reasons. The first is other countries do not , so the UK has to compete under the EU free trade arrangements with farms on the continent that do get subsidies and other support. The second is if the Department itself is offering cash incentives not to farm on potential farmland it may need to level the playing field by offering suitable help for good farming on that land. It is all very well to say wilding cuts the carbon output on the land wilded, but if we then have to transport food into the UK from hundreds or even thousands of miles away, grown and produced in carbon generating ways, we have done nothing to save the planet and much to damage the UK economy.

The government has promised new schemes to stimulate innovation, investment and promotion of more U.K. food. I wish it would get on with them. We need to promote our farms and food now. There is no good reason for delay.

Helping the jobs market

A BBC journalist remarked on how a pro Brexit entrepreneur is now lobbying for more work permits for people from the EU as if this is some contradiction or denial of Brexit. They still do not get it. Brexit was about taking back control. We voted for Brexit so a wide range of decisions including the decision of who we invited to work here is taken in future in the U.K. by Ministers and MPs who can be thrown out at the next election if they get things wrong. We did not vote to ban all economic migrants to the U.K., though many did vote to reduce the large flows we were experiencing under

freedom of movement. It was the EU's demand that all arriving EU citizens had access to benefits on arrival that David Cameron tried to change and failed, illustrating how little influence we had on EU policy.

The way the U.K. came to depend on hundreds of thousands of low paid workers from the EU in a number of sectors was not a good model for them or us. We need going forward to do more to raise productivity by investing in people and in machine and computer support to raise wages and reduce our need for cheap unskilled Labour. The so called cheap labour imposed strains on housing, welfare and public service budgets whilst not guaranteeing a good lifestyle to the migrants. We can do better by welcoming fewer economic migrants, attracting a higher proportion with skills, and doing more to promote higher productivity and wages.

There is also a regularly repeated need to have more control over illegal economic migrants. The government has promised new legislation to allow it to take tougher action against the scandal of people trafficking and the dangerous boat services across the Channel. I do not doubt the Home Secretary's wish to end this Nasty trade. Given the decisions in the courts it will take a change of law to bring this under some control.

I respond to the Farming Today challenge

On Tuesday Morning BBC's Farming Today asked listeners to send in ideas for future programmes. They certainly need some to vary their diet of stories on climate change, the dangers of free trade and the need to wild the countryside. We have had five years of anti Brexit and climate change dominance.

So here's some of the missing stories and viewpoints they can catch up on

- 1 The dangers of free trade with the EU to our farms. Why did we lose so much market share to the EU as members of the single market and how can we correct now?
2. The way we can raise animal welfare standards now out of the EU, and how we can enforce higher standards on EU imports
3. The scope for a much bigger timber industry in the U.K. as the plans for planting so many more trees are rolled out
4. Why DEFRA has still not set out its subsidy and support packages for more food growing and farm productivity improvements. How can we expand our food production?
5. When will the U.K. ban the large industrial foreign supertrawlers overfishing our waters and damaging the marine environment?
6. Will the U.K. regulators and water industry put in more reservoir capacity so farms in future will have access to irrigation water in dry spells?

7. As there is growing demand for U.K. fruit and veg What more needs to be done to expand the U.K. industry. Can we reverse the damage done by past EU grants to grub up U.K. orchards.
8. An evaluation of training, wages and career prospects in farming to nurture more home talent and increase the number of better paid jobs.
9. An assessment of damage to dairy in the U.K. from keeping U.K. short of milk quota for many years.
10. Opportunities to reclaim land for agricultural use through better drainage, water management, and sea defences.

Yesterday I was relieved to learn from this programme's expert witness on landslips in the Brecon Beacons indicating climate change that landslips are the "canary in the mine" and the canary is "singing loudly" at the moment. That is a relief, so no undue landslips then. The canary in the mine did not sing but passed out if dangerous carbon monoxide gas was present. How do the BBC find such well informed experts?

What use will you make of the railway?

I have been in discussions with the rail industry and Ministers over the future of the railway.

In order to define a post Covid role and to regain lost market share the railway needs to understand what many people think about railways. When people are considering how to carry out a journey they will consider the time it takes, the cost it incurs, and wider issues of convenience and comfort. They are interested in their door to door journey, not just the part of the journey they could do by train.

The pre Covid railway depended on commuters for a lot of its passenger revenue. Off peak leisure travel was often on heavily discounted tickets, and often with trains that were not full. As many office based businesses examine hybrid working with more done at home on digital systems and less in the office both the numbers using the trains and the fares they are prepared to pay are likely to come down substantially. People will want flexible season tickets that allow a wide choice over days and times of travel. Correct pricing probably by a system of rising discounts as people travel more will also be more popular if the part time commuter can also have some journeys off peak, which could also help the railway company when planning capacity provision.

At the core of the new railway should be freight. Most people in the country would like to see more freight on the trains and fewer large foreign trucks on the motorways. To make this practical there needs to be keener pricing and better service from rail. Time was when the large industrial estates were crossed by branch lines linking them to the main rail network, with single waggon marshalling to allow use by smaller factories as well as by the trainload users. Today most industrial parks boast good motorway or trunk road access instead. In its later years before privatisation BR was not

interested in single waggon traffic but majored on oil, cement, aggregates, bricks, cars and the other large scale trainload customers. The rail industry needs to put in more access to industrial parks, more marshalling yards and state of the art freight control and surveillance systems. Sealed freight containers on trains could assist with streamlining border checks and controls.

The railways have a disadvantage in not in many cases being able to do door to door, so they need easy transfer of containers from rail waggon to truck tractor unit for end delivery. They should have big advantages on fuel and driver costs with low friction transit and far bigger loads per driver. These advantages increase the longer the total journey distance.

There remains the issue of what social and leisure use will people want to make of the railway? Should that be subsidised and if so by how much? Can the railway do more by way of specials to events to take congestion and parking strain away from Concerts, football and the rest? What use do you want to make of the railway?

The CV 19 Inquiry

The Opposition parties spurred on by Mr Cummings want an immediate CV 19 Inquiry. The government rightly points out it is not over yet so why not wait until the pandemic has officially passed.

At the heart of the argument is the issue of how many have died from CV 19 and whether fewer would have died with a different policy. The Opposition want the narrative to be that lockdowns work so any period without full lockdown risked more deaths. The global figures however do not show any simple relationship between intensity of lockdowns and death rates. Nor does this approach allow us to explore the alternative some of us preferred to full lockdown, the safeguarding of the groups of people most at risk from a disease which does not offer much threat to healthy younger people.

Today I renew my request of the NHS that they review the accuracy of the data. The U.K. has now the 17 th highest deaths per million people on worldometer figures, below countries like Belgium, Czechia and Hungary that did lockdowns. It is however high up the table of deaths in relation to case numbers, because the U.K. has done a better job at limiting case spread than many. 50 countries have had more cases per million than us. I have defended the NHS by suggesting that the U.K. overcounted Covid deaths in the early months. In the early months some people were put down as CV19 deaths without a positive test result. They may have shown cold, flu, catarrh or other respiratory symptoms. Throughout people dying of a range of other conditions have been recorded as a Covid death if they had a positive test result up to 28 days before death. The CV19 may have little or nothing to do with their actual death. In contrast a country like Germany seems to have taken a much tougher line in demanding proof that someone died of Covid before so

recording it.

If the NHS review disagrees with my assumption and concludes the death figures are right then the NHS has to ask why we had one of the worst death rates from people getting the disease. There then needs to be analysis of infection control, discharges policy and treatments used. I and others raised a number of issues from early on about infection control, use of isolation hospitals, discharge of patients and testing of potential drugs which will be relevant if there is a high death rate to examine. The U.K. may have had a higher case rate amongst the most vulnerable groups leading to a higher death rate in relation to cases.