

Environment Secretary's speech at Countryfile Live 2019

It is just over a week since the Prime Minister asked me to take on the role of Secretary of State at Defra.

And I am delighted to be making my first speech here today with our two great hosts, the National Trust and Countryfile. I am a big fan of both of them.

Both of them do so much to care for our environment, by showcasing the brilliant work of our food producers and rural businesses and to spread the word about the powerful importance of the rural economy for this country's prosperity and for our quality of life.

It is a real pleasure to be following on directly from Hilary McGrady and I want to express my gratitude to the National Trust for their stalwart custodianship of so many of our heritage properties and many of our most precious landscapes and coastlines.

I can think of no better place than Countryfile Live to get stuck into this new job surrounded by thousands of people here across the festival today who value and understand the rural way of life.

Living in my Chipping Barnet constituency gives me easy access to our great capital city, but also to the beckoning green fields and trees of Hertfordshire and beyond.

I live in a suburb, but I yield to no one in my affection for our beautiful countryside.

There is no better cure for the stresses and strains of elected office, and there have been a few in the recent years. There is no better cure than escaping for a few days to one of the UK's many stunning rural landscapes.

Whether it's the towering fells of the Lake District or the moors and beaches of Northumberland or the rolling fields of Wiltshire dotted with monuments dating back millennia. I count myself truly blessed to live in a country which contains such superb natural beauty.

I have dropped by one or two of the 700 stands here at Countryfile Live. 700 exhibitors contributing to the rural economy that generates nearly £250 billion a year for our overall GDP.

Food and drink is our biggest manufacturing industry and it has been a tremendous success story in recent years.

This is a testament to the enterprise, innovation and hard work of so many of you and others here at Countryfile Live today.

We should take huge pride in the achievements of our farmers in producing the

highest quality food to some of the toughest safety and animal welfare standards anywhere in the world.

We must always acknowledge that our farmers are such a vitally important part of the stewardship of our natural environment.

And during this time of great change for our country, there is much to do to ensure that we help the rural economy thrive in the future.

And that brings me to Brexit, inevitably.

There can be no doubt of the division this has revealed.

Whatever course we take it will involve controversy, but I firmly believe we need to get on with it, to get it done and to leave by 31st October.

The Prime Minister is clear that he wants a deal agreed and will be doing everything he can to try to achieve that.

But he is equally clear that the time for delay and division is over.

So that is why he has massively stepped up preparations for leaving on 31st October whether an exit treaty is agreed or not.

And we're giving the very closest attention to the interests of food and farming businesses as we work towards exit day.

Undoubtedly there are some risks ahead but I want to highlight that these sectors, along with our fishing communities, will also have many opportunities open up to them as we regain the freedom to make our own laws as we push forward with an independent trade policy and as we create new world-leading systems to replace the CAP and CFP.

I want to see our farmers released from the appalling complexity, rigidity and bureaucracy of the Common Agricultural Policy.

So we will press ahead with a new system of support which rewards farmers for environmental stewardship and improving the health and welfare of animals and which helps them become more productive, more competitive and more successful.

That new approach based on the principle of public money for public goods will be designed for our domestic needs and underpinned by a reformed and proportionate approach to regulation and enforcement.

As well as securing vital goals in terms of our environment and animal welfare a core aim is to provide a stable platform for our producers to thrive and to seize the opportunities provided by Brexit to sell our fantastic food into new markets all around the world.

But of course my new brief covers matters which go well beyond farming.

Few people, as Hilary has ably pointed out, could be unaware that

environmental issues have shot up the political agenda in recent years.

And it's heartening that so many children and young people are engaged in these matters something I've experienced many times in my constituency work on these crucial campaigns for the future of our planet.

Defra's Year of Green Action project is designed to harness and encourage all that energy and enthusiasm.

And the Government is determined to rise to the challenge that these young people are setting us.

In this regard, I'd really like to commend my predecessor, Michael Gove, for his outstanding work, in so many fields, but in particular to committing the Government to a hugely ambitious 25 Year Environment Plan.

We know the crucial importance of clean water in our rivers and lakes, and clean air to breathe.

We are driving forward a global agenda to tackle plastics pollution in the ocean.

We were one of the first countries in the world to make a commitment to net zero emissions by 2050.

And a strong focus on sustainability, on biodiversity and the natural environment is a theme running through both our Agriculture Bill and our forthcoming Environment Bill.

We want the fields around this place and the 85% of England that is classified as rural land to be rich in wildflowers, insects and birds.

And in our efforts to maintain the land, and the soil, in such a way that there is less pollution, greater fertility, more abundant biodiversity our aim is to create the conditions for economic growth which is both more sustainable and resilient.

I have heard the challenge put clearly to me this afternoon Hilary.

And as I've said, this Government is very much up for that challenge.

Our Environment Bill will be ground-breaking and the new watch-dog it will create will have the powers and independence it needs to hold this and future Governments to account so that standards are upheld, laws are respected and commitments are met.

That is because we recognise that protecting our environment is crucial to our success as a nation that is as the Prime Minister said last week the greatest place to live; the greatest place to bring up a family; the greatest place to send your children to school and the greatest place to set up a business and invest.

In conclusion, we all here know that mankind's impact on nature has been

profound.

I was delighted when the Prime Minister highlighted the environment in the speech he gave on the steps of Number Ten on the day he became Prime Minister.

I would like to close by referring to a letter sent to me by Emma Howard Boyd of the Environment Agency and Tony Juniper of Natural England on my new post.

They pointed out that this country led the world in the industrial revolution and now, at this critical juncture, we can lead once again in switching to a new greener more sustainable economy.

They wrote: "If we invest in nature and climate, we know it will increase long-term stability for health, security and prosperity.

"This is the new reality and present imperative ... not an optional 'green choice' that we can only afford in good times."

I agree and I look forward to working with them in my new role and indeed with everyone who is part of our country's ever-broadening coalition determined to ensure that we are the first generation to hand on the natural environment in a better state than we found it.

Thank you.