

Farm management and more food

The agricultural lobbyists are worried that leaving the EU will mean they can no longer recruit plenty of low wage labour from the continent to carry out tasks like fruit picking and vegetable harvesting by hand. The government will continue seasonal workers schemes and will make available a sensible number of labour permits. It should also promote productivity enhancing investment in technology.

There are now various systems to allow mechanised harvesting of everything from vegetables to fruit. Intelligent tractors and farm drones are able to plough, sow, spray and perform many other chores. The farmer will increasingly become the controller of complex systems of AI. He or she from the office will have detailed reports on the state of the crop, the diary for tending and harvesting and details of any problems. He or she will instruct the tractors, drones and other equipment to carry out the work needed at each stage of the development of the crop.

Some of the equipment will be large and expensive. A further move to larger farms would expedite this, but smaller farms can come together with rental agreements or with co-operative approaches, sharing the equipment needed to service their fields. UK farming is often more advanced and better capitalised than many continental farms, where small units lacking in capital characterise big areas. Here in the UK the very high cost of farmland means many farmers are tenants or employee managers. We need to find more ways of incentivising owners of land to work with farmers to put in the capital required.

As an ageing population of tenant farmers retires there is more scope to look at farm amalgamation and at new contract arrangements for younger farmers who cannot afford to buy land. Technology will be a great driver of new ways of farming, and will boost agricultural productivity. Leasing, hiring, and co-operating all offer options for new farmers to earn a good living alongside farm owners who want to make a decent return.

The UK is a large net importer of food from the rest of the EU as we have lost substantial market share in temperate foods since joining the EEC. and losing tariff protection. If on exit the EU imposes their high external tariffs on UK food we should impose selective tariffs on products where we can switch to more home consumption of our own product. We are likely to eat more home produced lamb and less imported beef if the EU opts for the tariff route. We should remove all tariffs on things we cannot produce for ourselves.