

In search of an agriculture policy

This week the government produced an "Agriculture Bill". That is welcome, as farmers need to know what rules will apply and subsidies will be paid after March 29 next year if we just leave the EU then.

On reading the Bill, it emerges that it is not such much an agriculture bill as a Land management and environment bill. It seems to assume a 21 month delay in exiting the EU, which may or may not happen. Great emphasis is placed on the state paying taxpayers money for public goods which include public access, upholding heritage, protecting or improving the environment and action which "mitigates climate change". There is an added provision which is welcome which says "The Secretary of State may also give assistance for and in connection with the purpose of starting, or improving the agricultural productivity" of a farm.

An Agriculture Bill, and the agriculture policy, should primarily be about food production. That after all is the main purpose of farms and market gardens. There is a huge opportunity awaiting us as we leave the EU. Our market share for home produced temperate foodstuffs has slumped from over 90% to under 70% during our time under the CAP. A well designed domestic policy could reverse that. There is no good reason why Holland outcompetes us in a wide range of temperate vegetables and flowers, nor why we should be so dependent on Danish bacon, French dairy products and Irish beef. These are all things we can do more of ourselves. It would be a good environment policy to cut the food miles and satisfy more demand with local produce. It would also ensure good landscape gardening by farmers. Many of us find well tilled wheatfields or lush grazing meadows with herds of cows a great landscape where the farmer provides a good view free to the onlooker whilst also producing the food we need to eat.

I have made representations that more needs to be built into the policy to promote UK home grown food. Mr Gove needs to liaise with Dr Fox at Trade to ensure we have early sight of a good new tariff schedule for an independent UK. Products from farms and fishing vessels are the main items that attract high EU tariffs against the rest of the world. The UK needs to optimise its tariff schedule to provide lower tariffs on some world foods to help the consumer, whilst imposing sensible tariffs against continental competition for the temperate foods we could produce in bigger quantities for ourselves.

The second thing Mr Gove needs to do is to set out in more detail what grants and subsidies will be available for UK farmers wishing to improve and expand in UK food production to assist them with a substantial uplift in capacity that we need as we leave the EU. I was delighted to see recently Chapel Down Vineyard announce its search for an additional 400 acres for new vines, such is the demand for its product. Wine growing adds a lot of value to the basic grapes, and offers scope for much greater import substitution. It will also save a good few drink miles on the transport system, as lugging cases of wine in glass bottles around is costly and generates a lot of exhaust gases. There are many other specialist agricultural areas where we can expand production and add value.