

My question on the Farming Debate – growing our own food

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con):

I am a strong supporter of the recent initiatives of the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister to make food growing far more important. What are the targets for getting much more self-sufficient in food, and will it not need further reorientation of the money away from the environmental land management scheme and wilding, and towards proper food promotion schemes?

Fay Jones:

My right hon. Friend pre-empts me. I will certainly come to talk about that point in just a few moments, but let me first talk about further reforms that the Government are introducing, particularly in the field of farming mental health.

We will make up to £500,000 available to charities to deliver projects that support mental health in the farming sector, building on the support already on offer through our farming resilience fund, which has benefited more than 19,000 farmers to date. Mental health in agriculture is a key concern for the Department, so much so that my right hon. Friend the Farming Minister regrets that he is unable to be with us at present, as he is hosting a roundtable on mental health in agriculture. I know that shadow Ministers will agree that that is a commendable thing to be doing. Altogether, the work to change our approach will build a better and more supportive system around farmers, so that they can get on and do what only they do best.

Before I talk about our final strand of work, I want to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans). Today his campaign for online retailers to carry a specific “buy British” button has achieved another success, as Ocado has become the latest retailer to adopt the tool, joining Morrisons, Aldi and Sainsbury’s. I congratulate him on his campaign.

Food security is a vital part of our national security. The primary role of farmers is to produce the nation’s food, and they deserve our gratitude for that—a point echoed to me on many occasions by the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Sir Robert Goodwill), who is away on a Select Committee visit and unable to join today’s debate. Recent years have brought home the truth of that, particularly in an age of climate change, instability and increasingly volatile global food production.

Uncertain times require us to double down on the certainty of our food system. In the Government’s food strategy, we set a clear commitment to maintaining domestic food production at the current level at least, which is around 60% of what we consume. The importance of food security is why we brought in the three-times-a-year food security report through the

Agriculture Act 2020. Going further, the Prime Minister announced a fortnight ago that, given the context of the last three years, we will significantly strengthen this work through a new annual food security index. Climate change is increasingly likely to impact on the sector, with more extreme weather events, so it is only right that we step up our monitoring of food security to ensure that we can act swiftly and decisively against any in-year shocks. We expect the work to be UK-wide and will work to achieve that, strengthening accountability across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.