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Brexit allows us to have national debate about farming

Even for those who do not share the Brexiteers' lust for life unshackled from Europe, there is, as with any divorce, something enticing; a frisson of illicit excitement in the prospect of once again being single.

Reasons for the break-up are many, but the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) must be near the top of the list. For 40 years Britain has been subject to its perversities, inefficiencies and unintended consequences, creating bafflement, distrust and a generally dysfunctional relationship between farmers and society at large. If there is a prize to be garnered from Brexit, it is in resetting this relationship, so fundamental to the health and wellbeing of people and planet.

Within the farming industry, there has been no shortage of talk about the historic opportunity to reshape the future. Gove may bring enthusiasm to the task and greater political clout in Cabinet than DEFRA has enjoyed for decades, but if he is to succeed where his predecessors failed, he is going to have to turn his words into actions and actually make something happen.

Setting aside the notable absence of underpinning legislation, DEFRA's 25 Year Environment Plan "A Green Future: A 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment" certainly provides Vision. Launched in January this year, it sets out an admirably bold ambition "to leave the environment for the next generation in a better state than we found it." Achieving this is a challenge in itself, but doing so whilst feeding a burgeoning population is an order of magnitude greater in complexity and ambition. To leave this challenge to DEFRA alone is to reduce it merely to an issue of agricultural practice and production, as has been the case for the past 40 years in which time agricultural policy has become a flatulence-inducing stew of compromise, bad planning and incoherent bureaucracy.

The truth is that if we live, breath, eat, drink, and sleep, we all have a vested interest in how we balance the need for food with the needs of our natural world. The tiresome parrying of points between the NFU, purporting to speak for all of farming on one side, and the environmental zealots purporting to speak for all things "natural" on the other, may have won each the odd battle, but it has won neither the war. The NFU's catatonic insistence that the environment must be restricted to both the metaphorical fringes of UK agricultural policy and the literal fringes of its members' farmland, ignores the fact that this approach has failed to arrest a decline in much of our environment's natural assets. It also obligingly sets up the environmental zealots' counter-argument that all of farming is presiding over nothing less than an environmental race to the bottom. Whilst indulging in their mutual myopia, they give the general public a fallacious choice; either feed the people or save the planet.

Neither speak for the many farmers, growers, and environmentalists who hold a more considered and constructive view that farming and environment can, and must, work in beneficial and mutually sustaining symbiosis. For them, Brexit is an opportunity to restart the conversation.

The premise is simple: the purpose of farming is to deliver health; the health of our natural world and all the natural assets upon which life itself depends, and the health of our people sustained by a balanced diet of wholesome, nutritious food. DEFRA's consultation paper launched in February "Health & Harmony: The Future for Food, Farming, and the Environment in a Green Brexit", makes a start but it links farming only to the health of our environment. It says precious little about the role of farming to produce nutritious food for a healthy

population. This at a time when the UK has just surpassed the USA as having the highest percentage of obese school-aged children, and obesity and poor diet have beaten smoking into 2nd place as the number one factor driving poor health in the UK.

Government must now do something it has never done before; enshrine into legislation across farming, food, environment, education, transport, business, and international trade, the common mission to create and sustain a healthy population and natural world.

There truly is no such thing as a free lunch. No foodstuff, whether derived from animal or plant, is free of environmental cost or moral hazard. Even if some of us don't yet know it, we really don't want our farmers to stop producing food from the land they tend, but we - and they - may want to stop those ways of producing food that have the biggest impact on our environment whilst making the least contribution to our health. Gove and his fellow Ministers will have to be prepared to break a few eggs and upset a few interests if they are to ensure our extraction from CAP creates a radically different future for the health of our people and our small bit of planet. They have a generational opportunity before them, and our representative democracy gives them both the power and the duty to do so, but on a matter so fundamental we must all participate in the public sphere, acknowledge the need to change our behaviours, and act. Farming has to speak less to itself and more widely with society. When faced with bare facts such as declining soil fertility, its contribution to the public discourse can no longer be limited to a staunch defence of the status quo. UK farmers may be some of the best in the world, but self-evidently, this is not the whole answer to addressing all the challenges ahead. The public also has some changes to make; food waste and profligate consumption of food, water, and energy drives demand for the most intensive and extractive methods of production. Government's next iteration of its policy on agriculture and environment is as central to all our lives as its policy and spending plans for education and health. A honest, balanced and trusted discourse between farming and society is much needed but can only be established when we are all prepared to acknowledge our complicity in creating the problem, as well as our responsibility, and ability, to find a better way to sustain healthy people and planet.