

## Time to engage with vegan moderates

A new year, and Brexit continues to consume the nation's collective headspace. And why wouldn't it? It is a seismic political change which will take a decade or more to run its course through our economy. But with the perspective of hindsight, it is a blip, dwarfed by the giant forces of societal and climate change that will have far greater lasting consequences than any challenge arising from Brexit.

Farming is already feeling the heat; literally with regards to climate, metaphorically in terms of society's changing attitude to diet. Across all developed economies, people are redefining what civilised societies can consider acceptable in terms of what food we eat and how it is produced. Whilst there is an unreachable cabal of the ill-informed and closed-minded, there also exists a thoughtful, less vociferous majority who feel genuine unease about aspects of how land and livestock are farmed for food. UK farming has to engage with this moderate majority. Not to doggedly defend the status quo, nor to relentlessly spin a positive message, but to engage honestly and seriously in order to build trust and understanding. Some of what we do, could be better, some things need to stop, and the mix of what we grow and rear will need to change simply because, like it or not, the market - or planet - will dictate it. Despite reforms achieved over the past 2 decades, the task of transforming farming from a production-led to a market-led industry remains work in progress.

Reflecting on the 2008 crash, Alistair Darling said of the bankers "that they had to be made to realise when in a crisis . . . one has to go further and faster than markets or people are expecting." UK farming must heed the lessons of the financial crash, in order to avoid a crisis of its own. Now is UK farming's "further and faster" moment. The grass-roots of our industry should not depend on its conservative leaders to lead the transformation. Farming needs some serious PR. Not the over-priced flim-flam for which PR has become synonymous, but public relations as the serious strategic business discipline responsible for earning trust and understanding in order to influence public opinion. To quote the CIPR "it is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics." Far from superficial it requires the most profound exercise of self-reflection about where your business is at and what needs to change in order to exceed the expectations of the society it exists to serve. It is undeniable, for example, that people and planet would be healthier if less meat was produced and consumed. Yet whilst farming risks getting bogged down in its battle with The Vegans, the potential to engage meaningfully with the moderate majority, to deliver transformation on mutually agreed terms, goes largely untapped. As Prof Michael Winter said in his 2018 Nuffield Lecture "Changing Food Cultures: Challenges and opportunities for UK Agriculture", there is an urgent need, and therefore opportunity, for [UK] agriculture to radically diversify its output toward human health and nutrition".

Royal Bank of Scotland was spectacularly brought to its knees by the financial crash. As Ross McEwan, its post-apocalypse CEO put it; it will take many years before the business is back on its financial feet . . . . . but at least a *decade longer* for RBS to recover the two things every business must have no matter how mighty; trust and reputation.