

## **Minette Batters on Food and the Environment**

At the AGM, Minette Batters, president of the National Farmers Union (NFU) and local farmer gave a brilliant, riveting talk on Food and the Environment; food being a topic she feels passionate about.

She took over her father's farm tenancy in 1998, and was grateful for being able to spend time there earlier as her role involves so much time on the road. She was elected chair of Wiltshire NFU in 2010, and (hard to imagine now) at the time was very nervous about public speaking. She went on to become Regional Board Chair for the Southwest and in 2014 deputy chair of the NFU. At that time, we were in the EU and the referendum wasn't even on the agenda. She became the first female chair of the NFU in 2018. She represents all farmers, both upland and lowland, and recognises the heavy responsibility of the role as her tenure has seen major change: Brexit, the pandemic with its lockdown, the war in Ukraine. She feels politicians take food for granted.

The UK left the EU subsequent to the referendum, but Brexit is far from 'done'. A huge amount of work with legislation needs to be resolved. For instance, seed potatoes are now excluded from entering the EU, so a trade worth £15m is not happening. Another outstanding issue is that there is no exchange of breeding stock as we don't have border control posts in France. Brexit has led to a £50m cost in paperwork. We now have full checks on our goods entering EU although we don't have any checks on incoming EU goods at present. There is also a need to resolve fast track plant checks as delay means plants die.

The pandemic led to a lot of waste, such as a massive oversupply of milk. People eat differently at home to the out of home market (lockdown closed restaurants, coffee shops, etc which were 50% of the market). No-one wanted steaks and joints - just mince - and there was worry by the Cabinet that we might run out of food - yet milk was being poured down the drain. Some horticultural businesses folded as no plants could be supplied to garden centres. She worked with supermarkets to try and change people's habits at home to be more like eating out, which worked to some extent. She had to meet NFU members online - which has continued.

Despite the effect of these events on rising food prices, and some empty shelves, our food is still the cheapest in Europe and we have maintained high environmental standards of animal welfare.

Politicians' attitudes to agriculture are important. For example, Boris Johnson focused on rewilding and the environment (remember 'Build back beavers?') rather than on food, taking the stance that the UK is wealthy enough to import its food needs. This attitude was later modified with the onset of the Ukraine war highlighting the issue of food security. She thinks that food and environment are inherently interlinked. In 2020, the much talked of US- UK trade deal threatened our farmers and our high farm standards. She emailed Lord Rothermere of the Daily Mail to tell him he had just weeks to save the family farm. To further raise the profile of this issue in the media, she phoned Jamie Oliver on his birthday in 2020 to enlist his help in her campaign over food standards and security. Initially he did not wish to work with the Daily Mail because of its past treatment of him, but did write a letter once the Mail agreed not to make any changes to it. This said we should not be importing food that we can grow here, and that any trade deals

should be fair, and accord with and not undermine our welfare standards. By the end of June over a million people had signed a petition to that effect. 70,000 wrote to their MPs over one weekend.

The last agriculture bill was in 1947 when we were only 30% self sufficient in food. By the 1980s we were 70% self-sufficient, averaging 60% over the past two decades. With our climate there is the potential to produce nearly all of our own fruit and vegetables by stretching the seasons. During the passage of the Agricultural Act 2020, Liz Truss (as Secretary of State for International Trade) would not agree to an agricultural reporting mechanism in any trade deal going into primary legislation, but finally all parties agreed to sign it off in October. Boris Johnson, as Prime Minister, wanted trade deals with Australia and New Zealand, but because of his lack of grasp of detail he did not appreciate unintended consequences of a deal importing meat, which gave away any powers of checks and balances. Six years previously, the then High Commissioner Alexander Downer had commented that Australia felt Britain had 'screwed them over' when it joined the EU in 1973 .

She emphasised that Prime Ministers matter, governments matter in food markets. She is currently trying to work with Rishi Sunak who wants to set an annual self-sufficiency target. The media have been very valuable in raising awareness of this, and the UK's trade deal with the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) was amended so that no hormone treated beef or chlorine washed chicken could be imported into the UK.

She explained that reporting in trade deals is important to avoid undermining our standards. For example, UK farmers aren't able to compete on price with chlorine washed chicken. Before we left the EU, it dictated the terms of trade, and we had no involvement in the imposition of checks and tariffs. Post-Brexit we have to negotiate our own deals. The EU is our closest trading partner. In Brexit negotiations agriculture was sacrificed to the importance of services. So we lost out on agriculture so we could access the markets with our services.

Turning to the environment she stated that there are legislated targets on the environment, but we don't treat food the same way and advised strongly that we should not take food supply for granted.

There then followed a very lively question and answer session which expanded upon the topics, in which the following questions were raised.

Is rewilding of concern to the agricultural world?

How desperate is the shortage of foreign workers?

How can you convince Brits to pay more for their food? Much is highly processed and low-income families spend a higher proportion of their income on food.

A concern was expressed that environment hadn't featured as much in the talk as food, as farming does cause pollution and degradation of soil.

Minette explained that the new subsidy system developed from environmental issues, and is public money for public good rather than payment relating to the size of the land holding. Within the landscape recovery scheme, taxpayers' money goes towards taking land out of food

production, e.g. planting lots of trees. Some of these funds go to foreign investors who buy up land which is then taken out of production.

The NFU focus is on sustainable food production. Food and environment are linked. Robots are actually slower than people at picking fruit and veg. People have been de-incentivised from agricultural work. The UK is attractive to foreign workers as labour is well paid and regulated compared with their home countries. It is not low skilled work.

There has been a 45% increase in input costs. Inflation is building. During Covid there was price competition between supermarkets, but the rise in the price of gas (150% higher than 2019) meant suppliers had to absorb these costs so not much money is being made – in some cases the price is lower than the costs which, in turn, is reducing production. We need to get people cooking from scratch. It is illegal in the UK to talk about price fixing owing to competition law. A new issue that needs watching is private equity buying up businesses to potentially asset strip them. (Kwasi Kwarteng refused to intervene in the acquisition of Morrisons by foreign private equity; Morrisons is a vertically integrated business – a whole chain). The USA takes a different approach.

We need to think more about the quality of food. Targets on air quality, net zero, water quality, tree planting could all be met by growing nothing but it's not sustainable. So many things could be done with the right policies. There are currently some perverse unintended consequences, for example: bio packaging is currently subject to a plastic tax. If everyone ate a plant-based diet, there would be the challenge of nitrogen fertiliser for plants. Manure can be used instead of artificial fertilisers if you keep livestock. Proposed legislation will ban live animal exports and strengthen powers of prosecution for dogs killing livestock.

To sum up, there is a need for sustainability in both food production and environmental concerns. The two are inextricably interlinked.

Minette was warmly applauded at the end - it had been a great talk.

Judy Howles