

Agriculture Bill speech:

Anne-Marie Trevelyan MP, to be delivered on 10 October 2018.

Thank you Mr Speaker.

As a rural Northumbrian for more than 20 years I have been closely involved with the trials and tribulations of local farmers and land managers, whose livelihood is determined by the health of our rural economy.

It is a physically hard life, the Northumbrian weather being a constant companion, with financial rewards sometimes feeling scarce. I am daily aware how much the rest of our citizens take for granted the assumption about the availability of UK produce in our supermarkets and local shops when they buy a loaf of bread, vegetables, meat, eggs and milk. There is little understanding of the day to day challenges dealt with to provide for our needs.

As a firm and longstanding Brexiteer, the opportunity to leave the Common Agricultural Policy and take charge of our land management of this great island of ours is most welcome. The principle of taxpayers support to our farmers has been driven by other European countries' land economies priorities, not helping our farmers to do the best with our land, but rather to follow subsidy for farming decisions. Now we can fix this.

The understanding of taxpayer support for farming is a fundamental underpinning of our food supply system, and it is a support taxpayers buy into, as long as it reaches its intended target and meets its stated aims. The EU's Common Agricultural Policy didn't do that. The voice of UK farmers has too often been drowned out by French or Spanish farmers' demands, and we have been stuck in a system not aimed at investing in the best land use - in Northumberland and elsewhere across our islands. We pay £6billion per year in to the EU's CAP system, of which £3billion comes back to our farmers. French farmers receive three times as much. We have been subsidising our EU competitors, which has led to continued support for poor productivity and less than optimal land use across the EU.

With our departure from the EU and this Agriculture Bill, we can now stop that for our own farming community in favour of putting our own more effective and targeted land management choices first. This reflects the optimistic outlook which Brexit brings, that we can and should determine our own land management policy.

At a local level, my caseworker Jen spends a great deal of her time dealing with concerned farmers who have yet to receive last year's payment, or are wondering if this year's will ever materialise. Mapping disagreements, disputes over hedge lines, common land use, and cross border farms, are just some of the challenges the EU based system - and perhaps historically our own delivery teams here in Whitehall - has thrown up and caused months of financial and emotional challenges for my Northumbrian farmers.

In addition to the funding disparity with other EU nations, years of working with our upland farmers in Northumberland has brought to my attention too many stories of wasted time and energy which could be better directed.

One of the biggest gripes are the multiple visits by officials to ensure that EU rules are being followed. Each visit adding stress and taking time, when one visit could cover all the issues. An OFSTED visit if you like Mr Speaker. One short window of pain but then trusted to be left alone to get on with their job. Because the vast majority of our farmers want to look after the land they are stewarding.

The undue pressures placed on our rural communities has always concerned me. Farmers have been asking for help to ease this burden for years. Until now, there was nothing I nor the Government could do. That's why this Bill is such an exciting piece of legislation - we will, at last, be able to create management and financial incentive systems to suit our needs and this Government's long term commitment to looking after our whole environment.

We will be designing a system which does not funnel funds to our farmers' foreign competitors but which frees up our land stewards to innovate;
A system which will actually support a holistic perspective of land management, which puts long term soil health, food production and water basin management with tree-planting which incentivises long-term investment for public, and economic, good.

The two are not mutually exclusive.

And most importantly, public good is not an empty phrase, it means that we can actually join up long-term urban health and security needs with the way we use our land - for everyone.

This new Bill is based on an inherent fairness, which sees farmers rewarded for what they do and produce, rather than the size of their landholdings. Crucially, it offers rewards for those who are already working hard to improve the environment, and to ensure their methods of production are sustainable for local wildlife and the wider ecosystem. This will begin to drive change for good across the country.

Taxpayers' money will now be used to support those working to improve animal welfare standards, create rich habitats for wildlife, plant trees and protecting unique peat reserves, so important in my own constituency in Northumberland. For the first time, we will have a system designed with the input of UK farmers and land managers, one that works with them and for them. This is a tremendous opportunity I know my farmers will seize.

As the MP for one of the most sparsely populated constituencies - that's humans, not sheep, of which we have millions! - and the most beautiful and ecologically diverse of constituencies, I am really pleased that it is not just farmers growing food on an annual cycle who will benefit from the new system.

Since my election in 2015 I have spoken in this House on many occasions about the increasing need to plant more trees, and to first of all actually meet our manifesto target of 11 million new trees planted this Parliament. Though, as the Minister is aware, I believe we need to be planting at least one tree for every citizen, not one for every 5 : a target of 50m new trees, which would show long-term thinking for land management and water basin stabilisation, and in so doing supporting the timber industry's needs, so that we reduce long-term reliance on imports of timber. For biomass, for housing frames, for furniture- we must aim to be able to become self-sustaining in timber. Timber absorbs carbon Dioxide as it grows, and then hold that carbon a second time as wood products.

The benefit of trees as a carbon capture device and a flood management tool remains underrated, but we have ministers in place who understand the importance of forestry and woodland maintenance and are supporting that aim.

In Northumberland we are home to the magnificent Kielder Forest, which covers over 250 square miles of our landscape. Excitingly, earlier this year, I joined local school children from Glendale to plant some of the first trees in a brand new forest at Doddington, which will eventually see over 600,000 trees planted in the largest new planting scheme in England for a generation. It is a vital scheme and we are very proud to be hosting it in Northumberland. But let us not be lulled into a sense of satisfaction - without the dogged determination of the investors and Andy Howard, the project would have failed to progress to fruition (or at least the start of a 50 year project- trees take their time!). The blocks created by government bodies who continually refused to take responsibility and kept passing the buck on decisions. Only ministerial willpower overcame this - for which many thanks. But hardly the way to encourage others to commit to long-term investment in new tree plantings. We must make sure that the process and encouragement becomes real in the years ahead if we are to get those new trees into the ground and maintained to maturity over the next 40 years.

Alongside the challenge of forestry becoming a central part of future land management policy, I would like to raise my concerns on the historical lack of focus on peat management. There is still no Peat Strategy published - and yet we have, across our islands, and especially in Northumberland - vital deep peat resources.

Deep peat is a critical sequestrator of carbon, and an invaluable ecological base for some of the world's unique wildlife - from red grouse to curlew.

I am concerned that existing aforested deep peat has no protection from replanting in England, and I urge the Secretary of State to look to Forestry Commission Scotland, to provide guidance which will resist the continuing encouragement for existing woodland owners to be expected to replant into deep peat in England.

A single - once-only - plantation once harvested, can leave the peat relatively unharmed and able to self-restore, as roots have not caused too much damage at depth. The harvesting process, alongside the damage caused by heavy equipment, will release carbon. But after that process is completed, and now that we understand the unique ecological value of this peat to our national and global environment, we should NOT be replanting trees on these sites.

MR Speaker...

Crucially, this Bill offers a system which can be reactive – to land stewards' needs, to market fluctuations, to changes in habitat and wildlife. A system which is not simply a diktat to our rural communities but which listens to their expertise, ideas and solutions. Finally I will be able to tell my constituents that yes, we can and are improving our animal welfare standards to be stricter than those of our European neighbours'. That of course we should have CCTV in slaughterhouses, and yes we should consider whether or not it is right to export live animals.

This Bill signifies the start of taking back control. Of the UK being able to do the right thing by our communities. Of having the will and desire to create systems that work in practice. I heartily support this Bill and will be commending it to the rural communities from Berwick to Belsay, and from Amble to Elsdon, that I serve.

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