

A New World – A New Approach?

I am struck by shifting attitudes in the farming industry as we gear up for change and very likely a different world to the one we are in today. Many potential incentives, developments and long overdue initiatives are in train, many of which would previously have met with fierce resistance and a thousand reasons why they cannot or would not work in today's world.

The fact that we are leaving the EU (in some form) is now accepted; as is the fact that any support for agriculture will be different; and the likelihood of greater competition from imports as a result of international deals struck around the globe is accepted as well. In a previous world, any one of those would have been seen as an impossible challenge to be fought tooth and nail.

To add in the demand for higher environmental and animal welfare standards, coupled with lower antibiotic use at a time when farmers are likely to be under more pressure than ever before, would be seen as the straw that could break the camel's back. And that is before we mention veganism and supermarket consolidation, the terrible spring weather and other issues.

Yet, there is no revolution, no mass protests on the streets of London; not yet, anyway! The reason for this is that farming leaders know that such momentous proposals need properly crafted and carefully considered responses. Shouting from the rooftops and organised opposition is not going to work this time. There is the small matter that 60% of our farmers voted to leave the EU to consider!

There will have been a host of different reasons why farmers voted to leave, but a desire to disrupt the status quo and change our current course of action will have been one. So vote to leave they did, and industry leaders need to cope with that and offer solutions, protecting their farmers as much as possible whilst accepting facts that may be hard to swallow.

There is always a silver lining to any cloud and this one is no different. I am delighted to see Defra, led by Michael Gove, committing to the Livestock Improvement Programme (LIP), which will enable this country to benefit from a national database, the likes of which Ireland, Holland, Denmark, Israel, New Zealand and many others have benefitted from for many years.

This database will not only replace the creaking, fragmented systems we currently have, but will allow a huge single bank of information to be acquired; a bank of data which will enable us to properly benchmark our industry, improving competitiveness. Realising a step-change in productivity is going to be essential in order to compete in the new world, and each sector has its own challenges and they all start from different positions.

Some sectors depend on export; others undersupply the home market. Some are already fairly competitive internationally, others not so. However, it does seem that the

top 25% in each sector can hold their own on an international stage and are relatively safe, so the task in hand is to bring the next 50% up as near that standard as possible. The bottom 25% need to consider their position and either make extraordinary progress or find a different path.

Huge efforts have been made over the years to assist those who are struggling, and progress has been held back to try and assist those who find it difficult or are not that interested in keeping up. I detect a very different mood in the industry now, a much harder attitude towards those who are not up to standard. There is a real drive to tackle health and welfare in the livestock sectors and a full-on attack on endemic disease.

Many talk of compulsory programmes – even legislation – in order to eradicate some endemic diseases and gain full control of others. There is an appetite to raise farm assurance standards, or introduce schemes which reward good practice and high standards only.

I see industry pressure on antibiotic use yielding very good results as each sector delivers year-on-year reductions, showing the world that UK agriculture has got its act together and will show what can be done as a large producer of food. This will of course depend on progress being maintained and keeping our foot on the gas, which I am confident we will do.

Human medicine is working hard to achieve similar results under the 'One Health' banner, and we need to avoid being deterred by the cry that other countries in the world are falling behind. We lead by example and all will benefit as international markets seek out meat and dairy produced to the highest standards. Food safety is of course a given and whilst we do have the challenge of food fashion, food fads and anti-livestock farming groups, we can ride out most of that criticism by raising standards and doing the job well.

I see this industry raising its game further over the coming years. Yes, there will be some pain; yes, there will be difficulties and, in some cases, great turmoil. However, there will also be opportunities for entrepreneurs and young entrants. The size and scope of these opportunities will depend largely on the challenge, once we know where we are in the scheme of things. If the challenge is great, then land prices and rents will fall; painful for some but presenting opportunities for others.

No government sets out to damage their agricultural sector, for that would be foolhardy and carries great risk. However, leaving the EU forces the government to look at serious agricultural reform due to the financial pressures that such a move presents. Couple that with the fact that most MPs (of all parties) share a real dislike of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) with many farmers. So if all believe a reform is overdue, then it is guaranteed.

The last real agricultural reform was in 1947 and it transformed the industry, introducing a period of stupendous growth and productivity, and successive prime ministers used to hold up the agricultural 'revolution' to other industries as an



incentive to do much better. Farmers basked in that glory for decades, but slowly the shine has dulled and as the CAP has lost its way, so farmers have found themselves under pressure today.

In the new world, there is an opportunity to put that right and once again stand on our own two feet, be proud of what we do, pitch our ingenuity, inventiveness and resilience against others, and competing with our EU neighbours and others in the world. Collectively we can improve our performance by ridding ourselves of endemic diseases where possible, controlling and minimising others, leading to healthier stock, more valuable stock, more productive stock with less antibiotic use.



Gwyn Jones

Gwyn Jones was born into a hill farming family in Snowdonia, North Wales. Gwyn trained as an engineer with Rolls Royce in Shropshire, and worked in London for a specialist engineering company before deciding to go back to agriculture, working on a large estate in North Wales whilst attending college (Llysfasi and Aberystwyth). Gwyn is now immersed in off farm activity as well as farming with his daughter Gwenan (past three years) at Boughton Dairy, Tillington, near Petworth, West Sussex.

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