

I respond to the Farming Today challenge

On Tuesday Morning BBC's Farming Today asked listeners to send in ideas for future programmes. They certainly need some to vary their diet of stories on climate change, the dangers of free trade and the need to wild the countryside. We have had five years of anti Brexit and climate change dominance.

So here's some of the missing stories and viewpoints they can catch up on

1 The dangers of free trade with the EU to our farms. Why did we lose so much market share to the EU as members of the single market and how can we correct now?

2. The way we can raise animal welfare standards now out of the EU, and how we can enforce higher standards on EU imports

3. The scope for a much bigger timber industry in the U.K. as the plans for planting so many more trees are rolled out

4. Why DEFRA has still not set out its subsidy and support packages for more food growing and farm productivity improvements. How can we expand our food production?

5. When will the U.K. ban the large industrial foreign supertrawlers overfishing our waters and damaging the marine environment?

6. Will the U.K. regulators and water industry put in more reservoir capacity so farms in future will have access to irrigation water in dry spells?

7. As there is growing demand for U.K. fruit and veg What more needs to be done to expand the U.K. industry. Can we reverse the damage done by past EU grants to grub up U.K. orchards.

8. An evaluation of training, wages and career prospects in farming to nurture more home talent and increase the number of better paid jobs.

9. An assessment of damage to dairy in the U.K. from keeping U.K. short of milk quota for many years.

10. Opportunities to reclaim land for agricultural use through better drainage, water management, and sea defences.

Yesterday I was relieved to learn from this programme's expert witness on landslips in the Brecon Beacons indicating climate change that landslips are the "canary in the mine" and the canary is "singing loudly" at the moment. That is a relief, so no undue landslips then. The canary in the mine did not sing but passed out if dangerous carbon monoxide gas was present. How do the BBC find such well informed experts?

What use will you make of the railway?

I have been in discussions with the rail industry and Ministers over the future of the railway.

In order to define a post Covid role and to regain lost market share the railway needs to understand what many people think about railways. When people are considering how to carry out a journey they will consider the time it takes, the cost it incurs, and wider issues of convenience and comfort. They are interested in their door to door journey, not just the part of the journey they could do by train.

The pre Covid railway depended on commuters for a lot of its passenger revenue. Off peak leisure travel was often on heavily discounted tickets, and often with trains that were not full. As many office based businesses examine hybrid working with more done at home on digital systems and less in the office both the numbers using the trains and the fares they are prepared to pay are likely to come down substantially. People will want flexible season tickets that allow a wide choice over days and times of travel. Correct pricing probably by a system of rising discounts as people travel more will also be more popular if the part time commuter can also have some journeys off peak, which could also help the railway company when planning capacity provision.

At the core of the new railway should be freight. Most people in the country would like to see more freight on the trains and fewer large foreign trucks on the motorways. To make this practical there needs to be keener pricing and better service from rail. Time was when the large industrial estates were crossed by branch lines linking them to the main rail network, with single waggon marshalling to allow use by smaller factories as well as by the trainload users. Today most industrial parks boast good motorway or trunk road access instead. In its later years before privatisation BR was not interested in single waggon traffic but majored on oil, cement, aggregates, bricks, cars and the other large scale trainload customers. The rail industry needs to put in more access to industrial parks, more marshalling yards and state of the art freight control and surveillance systems. Sealed freight containers on trains could assist with streamlining border checks and controls.

The railways have a disadvantage in not in many cases being able to do door to door, so they need easy transfer of containers from rail waggon to truck tractor unit for end delivery. They should have big advantages on fuel and driver costs with low friction transit and far bigger loads per driver. These advantages increase the longer the total journey distance.

There remains the issue of what social and leisure use will people want to make of the railway? Should that be subsidised and if so by how much? Can the railway do more by way of specials to events to take congestion and parking strain away from Concerts, football and the rest? What use do you want to make of the railway?

The CV 19 Inquiry

The Opposition parties spurred on by Mr Cummings want an immediate CV 19 Inquiry. The government rightly points out it is not over yet so why not wait until the pandemic has officially passed.

At the heart of the argument is the issue of how many have died from CV 19 and whether fewer would have died with a different policy. The Opposition want the narrative to be that lockdowns work so any period without full lockdown risked more deaths. The global figures however do not show any simple relationship between intensity of lockdowns and death rates. Nor does this approach allow us to explore the alternative some of us preferred to full lockdown, the safeguarding of the groups of people most at risk from a disease which does not offer much threat to healthy younger people.

Today I renew my request of the NHS that they review the accuracy of the data. The U.K. has now the 17 th highest deaths per million people on worldometer figures, below countries like Belgium, Czechia and Hungary that did lockdowns. It is however high up the table of deaths in relation to case numbers, because the U.K. has done a better job at limiting case spread than many. 50 countries have had more cases per million than us. I have defended the NHS by suggesting that the U.K. overcounted Covid deaths in the early months. In the early months some people were put down as CV19 deaths without a positive test result. They may have shown cold, flu, catarrh or other respiratory symptoms. Throughout people dying of a range of other conditions have been recorded as a Covid death if they had a positive test result up to 28 days before death. The CV19 may have little or nothing to do with their actual death. In contrast a country like Germany seems to have taken a much tougher line in demanding proof that someone died of Covid before so recording it.

If the NHS review disagrees with my assumption and concludes the death figures are right then the NHS has to ask why we had one of the worst death rates from people getting the disease. There then needs to be analysis of infection control, discharges policy and treatments used. I and others raised a number of issues from early on about infection control, use of isolation hospitals, discharge of patients and testing of potential drugs which will be relevant if there is a high death rate to examine. The U.K. may have had a higher case rate amongst the most vulnerable groups leading to a higher death rate in relation to cases.

Wokingham Town Centre

I was pleased to see more people about enjoying the new town centre on Bank Holiday Monday. Cafes and eating places were particularly popular with many

sitting out in the sunshine. I visited some shops to see how they are getting on now we have had some relaxation of pandemic rules.

More of the new units are trading. Those who have not been recently should go and have a look for themselves. We need to use our town shops and services, and give them a boost after lock down.

In praise of the car

For many young people passing their driving test is an important rite of passage to adulthood. Acquiring your first vehicle is a major advance in your personal freedom.. Yet today government, Councils and better off greens from the security of their homes in major cities lecture the rest of us on the wickedness of the car. The better off Green city dweller can rely more on the tube or mass transit and has the money for taxis when needed. The aim is to get people out of car ownership or to reduce their use of the car, and in the meantime to cow people into keeping quiet about their reliance on this flexible and most popular form of transport.

Many Councils work away to make their localities hostile to car traffic, blocking off roads, and deliberately creating unsafe juxtapositions of bus lanes and cycleways with highway, and altering junctions to increase tensions between different road users. I have recently reviewed the many journeys I need to make for work, for shopping and for social and pleasure purposes. All the ones I need to do in my home constituency area either cannot be done by train, or if attempted by train would take me between three times and ten times as long depending on the distance I needed to walk from the destination station, the frequency of the timetable and whether I needed first to go into Reading by train to then get out on another line. All these trips would also be dearer given the relative marginal costs of each mode of travel. Like many people I conclude if the train option is both much longer and dearer it is not a sensible choice. Added to that how would I manage a weekly shop on the train and carrying the groceries to and from stations. In Central London I do mainly walk or use the tube where the shorter distances and the regularity of the trains makes those the best options now the roads have been so blocked and parking removed or priced so high.

Most people in my local area come to the conclusion they mainly use the car. Many take the children to school by car unless they live close to the school. They go on to their place of work in the car because most offices, shops and factories are not near a station. They take the family to a cafe or restaurant by car because it easier with many of the family items they might need in the car already. They visit Granny by car because Sunday transport services are so poor.

Sensible Councils understand we need to live with the car. Its flexibility is the ally of better town centres and shopping areas if the Council allows easy access and cheap or free parking. It is the ally of young people being able to enjoy their lives and make more social contacts, it is the friend of

events, theatres and concerts wanting people to get back from them at hours of less public transport, and the stand by means to tackle many emergencies for a family. The car can get you to the chemist, the doctor or to the direct rescue of a family member in trouble.

Sensible car policy means designing junctions that encourage freer flow and segregates different types of road user to make them safer. It means building a better local network of strategic roads designed with the needs of the van, truck and car driver in mind, allowing more time and attention for pedestrians, bikes and buses on other local roads. Above all it needs more capacity to ease congestion and tensions on the ever popular roads.

Governments local and national will discover that if they make it too difficult to get about by car there will be a voter backlash. The polls may tell us people want to use their cars less and are worried about air quality, safety and other important issues. If you look however at what people are actually doing they are relying more and more on their cars to buy the food, get to school and work and have some fun. Even before all lockdown is lifted traffic levels are back to pre pandemic levels whilst train and bus travel is struggling to get back to 50% of former levels.