

Farming for our future

The UK currently runs a massive £20bn trade deficit in food with the rest of the EU. In 1984 the UK was 78% self sufficient in food. It produced 95% of all the temperate food we needed at home. The early years under the EEC had been fine for farming. Then the EU put in milk quotas and other restrictions on us which began a long decline in our ability to sustain home production. The Common Fishing Policy led a fast decline in our fishing industry. We have seen home production fall from 78% to 60% of our needs. We now import more than a quarter of the food of the kind we can grow or produce for ourselves. This is despite having one of the best climates for growing what we need.

Under the milk quota system which lasted 30 years from 1984 the UK only had half the milk quota of Germany, and ended up importing a lot of processed milk products from the continent. The Danish pig industry, the Dutch market gardening and flower businesses and many others made big inroads into our home market. Our fishing grounds were taken over by the whole of the EU under the Common Fishing Policy. We changed from landing 1 million tonnes of fish in the year we joined the EEC, to landing just 400,000 tonnes last year. The UK became a net importer of fish, after years of being a net exporter with one of the richest fishing grounds in the world. The large quantities landed elsewhere meant we needed to impose more restrictions on the total catch.

When we leave the EU we will be able to design a fishing and farming policy that allows us to sustain higher levels of home production. It will need further investment. The UK could do more food processing to add value to the staples supplied by the farms. Much of this can be done through co-operatives or processing businesses working in partnership with the farms. Where farm size is relatively small mechanisation will also require collaboration, joint investment or rental agreements to mobilise the high powered and sophisticated machinery that can now automate farming and make it more efficient.

The UK is extending the growing season for everything from asparagus to strawberries by polytunnels. We presently only produce one fifth of our own apples, but have the techniques to greatly increase the output and the durability of the apples over a longer season. All this will be accelerated if the EU does opt for WTO tariffs rather than carry on tariff free as we propose. Only in agriculture are the tariff barriers potential high. They would require a rapid response from UK farms to fill the gaps caused by dearer EU product, rather than seeing us buying more from non EU sources overseas. Even without tariffs following the recent strong performance of the Euro against all major world currencies including the pound, UK farmers are in a good position to expand. Doing so cuts food miles, gives us the pleasure of local produce, and eats away at that colossal food deficit the EU has given us.