

My speech during the debate on the Agriculture Bill, 10 October 2018

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): There has been a big decline in our self-sufficiency as food producers during the 46 years in which we have been in the common agricultural policy. As a result, we are now net importers from the continent of Europe, to the tune of £20 billion a year—a very large part of our balance of payments deficit—of food, including processed food, that we could rear or grow for ourselves, or process for ourselves if we wished. I hope that, as the Secretary of State works away at the Bill during its passage through the House, he will take on board what is being said by all of us who are urging him to make good production—high-quality food production, and local food production—a central part of his mission and what he is trying to achieve in conjunction with our agricultural businesses and our farmers, because much more can be achieved.

One of my colleagues has already pointed out that we could have new procurement rules that would allow us competitive procurement that also takes into account food miles. A really good green policy is to get the food miles down. We do not need ships and trucks carrying around bulky and quite heavy items of not huge value, when we could be growing them for ourselves and the farmer could be making a profit because transport costs would be lower, so can we please do that?

Will the Secretary of State understand that perhaps the most important thing farmers need to know, from 30 March next year if we leave without an agreement or from 2020 if we leave with an agreement, is what our schedule of tariffs will look like, because Brexit is not a great threat or problem; it is a massive opportunity? Here is an industry that has been wrecked and damaged and pillaged for 46 years, almost as badly as the fishing industry in some cases, which was probably the worst hit, and we have the opportunity to take it back in hand and encourage those who work on our behalf in the industry and to bring a bit of sunshine to the operation to show that there is a huge market opportunity out there.

The great joy is that this Bill rightly takes powers so that the Secretary of State and the Government can do what they need to do with the WTO, which will be running our trade framework whatever we do by way of agreement or no agreement. The WTO also has a pretty important role in this today, but of course we cannot influence it directly because the EU handles the account, and very badly it does so from the UK point of view.

If we look at our tariff schedule, we see at the moment that we have eye-wateringly high tariffs on temperate foods that we can grow or produce for ourselves from outside the EU, but zero tariffs on temperate products we could rear or grow for ourselves from inside the EU, and that competitive onslaught from some of the intense, and often subsidised and highly capitalised, farming on the continent has done enormous damage to our market share and undermined the businesses of many of our farmers over the 46 years

we have been in the EU.

The Government should set out urgently for consultation what our tariff schedule will look like if we are leaving on 30 March 2019, because I assume the tariffs will be above zero for the EU as they have got to be the same as for the rest of the world, but I assume that we would want lower overall tariffs than the EU imposes on the rest of the world, and I assume that we would want to flex the tariffs down more on the things we cannot grow and rear for ourselves and would also want to make sure there is protection in there, in the spirit of our current regime, which is heavily protected against non-EU products.

I am not sure what the right balance is; that is something I am sure my right hon. Friend and the International Trade Secretary have either worked out or will work out quite soon, but the sooner we consult on it, the more hope we will give the farming industry. It must feel part of this process, because these will be its tariffs and they offer us this great opportunity to get access to some cheaper food where we are not competing and have uniform protection at a sensible level for both the EU and the non-EU, because it is the EU that is causing the main threat.

May I remind my right hon. Friend that he is our English Agriculture Minister and we want him to speak for England? Who in this Government does speak for England? I come into the Chamber and hear debates about the Scottish problem and the Irish border, but we must not forget England, our home base for most of us on this side of the House. England expects; England wants better; England wants to be able to compete; England wants a policy designed to promote English farms. I find that a really good English farm, with really good farming, looks beautiful and deals with the environment as well as food production.