

**Press release**

**1 February 2021** – On 28 January, more than 200 liverymen, guests and food and farming industry experts joined The Worshipful Company of Farmers (WCF) inaugural ‘Question Time’ debate. Panellists Minette Batters, NFU; Professor Sir Charles Godfray, Oxford University; Dr Darren Moorcroft, The Woodland Trust and Ian Wright, The Food and Drink Federation took questions from the audience on a wide range of topics, most notably - the chances of the farming industry getting to net zero, the progress and implications of the new Agricultural Act, and whether consumers will always value price and convenience of food, over sustainable farming and welfare.

Chaired by the Master of the Farmers’ Company, Richard Whitlock, the panel were optimistic about how realistic it was to expect the UK to actually become carbon neutral, with the government and industry already starting to have the structures in place and public sentiment, especially amongst the young, moving in favour. *“Having ripped up the old rulebook, we have a new one,”* said Minette Batters*. “We are one sector who can get to net zero, without downsizing livestock numbers. It is good for business; it is good for the planet and the legislation is in place. We should incentivise farmers to take a leadership opportunity. It is a game changer and agriculture is in a good place to achieve it.”*

Ian Wright struck a note of caution highlighting *“there are some hard yards on what different nations can do and when they do it. There will be some pain for consumers and industry. The good news is your kids will tell you what you need to do and how you need to change.”*

On the Agricultural Act, Darren Moorcroft welcomed public funds being made available for public goods, emphasising that getting the right balance between cropping and woodland as being key to the future. He believes some landowners will shift their focus and create woodlands and other habitats. Minette Batters talked about the dangers of the funding being available to all and there being a risk that the vast amount of money made available being grabbed by big players, leaving others, such as tenant farmers, missing out and exposed*. “More clarity is needed from the Government on how this will work.”*

On the question of what consumers value most (price v sustainable food) there was a consensus – it is price. Ian Wright highlighted some stark statistics on the trend in the proportion of the household budget spent on food. In the 1950s it was 50%. Today it is 8%, concluding that most shoppers don’t have to make a choice, they can have it all. The sense was the food and farming industry have done the hard work, and created the safest food system in the world, driving down the cost of production and distribution, with the supermarkets driving down price. This continuous investment over the years has paid off, but the model is not sustainable, said the panellists. Farmers will need to get more out of the market system, choices will have to be made between sustainability and price, with food prices having to rise. Sir Charles Godfray warned however that while in the end the shopper makes the rules, they won’t be able to do all the heavy lifting. The industry will need to play a role, change its discourse and its systems.

The debate shifted focus to food imports and the question of a carbon tax, with the panel believing it likely that one will come. The group felt it possible to implement a carbon tax that works for agriculture, highlighting however that if we ask farmers to do something better, they need to be rewarded. *“We have more work to do convincing the Treasury to understand and support us in making these changes,”* said Minette. Improved transparency on future trade deals is also an issue. The big challenge is the UK is largely a service industry and agriculture is a relatively small pawn in the trade deal game. But somehow getting the right trade deals for agriculture for the UK is *“the biggest game in town”* and most important thing to get right for the industry.

This linked with questions on the pros and cons of Brexit, with Sir Charles Godfray stressing it is now time to look ahead and see our new freedom as an opportunity to determine how we want to do things and to do them really well (citing the Covid vaccine programme as a good example of the UK taking a leadership position). Darren Moorcroft emphasised farmers needing to be entrepreneurs to make the shift from the old system to a new world, suggesting growing trees here as a priority rather than importing nursery stock as one example. Ian Wright and Minette Batters were agreed, the biggest and perhaps only, pro they could see was the UK remaining tariff and quota free after exiting the EU, whilst at the same time acknowledging significant bumps in the road exist such as getting used to the new mountain of paperwork involving in transporting goods.

On the final question on the emergency approval for use of neonicotinoids on sugar beet, the panel were divided. The NFU President talked about the importance of balancing the needs of saving the UK beet production sector against using less chemicals. She stressed the evidence that growing sugar beet, a flowerless crop, represents no threat to the bee population. The alternative to this limited use of neonicotinoids was importing sugar grown using the very same chemicals and the destruction of a valuable sector of the UK farming industry. Darren Moorcroft disagreed on the science – he felt the science hadn’t changed and the impact of the neonics is not good. The panel was however in general agreement that in the long term the answer is to find alternatives to using small molecule insecticides and that was going to require Government and society to adopt different attitudes to the adoption of new gene editing technologies.

In wrapping up the session, Richard Whitlock asked the panellists what they would do if they were Prime Minister for a day. The ideas range from rewriting agricultural policy to make it fit for the world stage, drafting a land use policy that recognises, and makes use of every inch of UK land, through to making sure all Secretaries of State are able and willing to take scientific advice and understand it. Finally, there was total agreement of the need for investing more money in research and innovation.

Master of The Farmers’ Company Richard Whitlock said “*Our experts have a clear message - our farming and food world is going through an unparalleled level of change. They can help but ultimately it is down to us to work out how to adapt our practices, use of land, spot new opportunities and shift with the needs of the next generation, and the climate and ecological emergency.”*

**Ends**

**Editors’ Note**

The Worshipful Company of Farmers is the City of London Livery dedicated to the positive promotion, better understanding, visibility, management and development of UK agriculture. Its principal charitable purpose is agricultural education, delivered through its portfolio of highly respected courses and the provision of training, grants, bursaries and awards to inspire, drive and recognise excellence.

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For more information, contact Terri Lucas, Moveo Associates, telephone 07899 985096, email terri@moveoassociates.com.