A greener future for farming?

RECENT pronouncements have been fairly explicit, so his latest remarks should hardly come as a surprise. However, in a speech at the Oxford Farming Conference last week, the Secretary of State at DEFRA, Mr David Miliband, gave the clearest indication yet of how he sees English agriculture developing in the future. His basic message was fairly straightforward. Farming in England was currently in transition, he said, and over the next two decades its entire operating environment would change. In such circumstances, farmers faced a clear choice: adapt and seek prosperity, or refuse to change and prepare for slow decline. What was needed was a shared and compelling vision for the long-term future of English agriculture—a shared, positive vision that speaks not just to farmers but to the whole country; a shared, positive vision that is about profit and about community, about exports and about climate change, about landscape and about farming diversification. There was also a need for the industry, government, retailers and consumers to be clear about their responsibilities in making this vision a reality. 'The core argument is that the future of farming is more about environmental security than food security,' he said. 'The role of government is to create opportunities and contracts, not protectionism and subsidy. And we will know we have succeeded when farming is renowned for its entrepreneurial mentality, not accused of a victim mentality.'

Under Mr Miliband’s and, one presumes, the Government’s vision, English farming by 2020 will be profitable in the marketplace. It will continue to produce most of the food consumed in the UK and will also contribute to exports. However, he said, ‘There just isn’t a food security argument for taxpayers to subsidise food production. It was a perfectly good argument during the war. It is not a good argument at a time of European integration and free trade. Today’s defining threat is not starvation in Britain; it is environmental insecurity.’

By 2020, he envisaged, ‘British consumption of British food will be the result of the skills, innovation, investment, branding and quality assurance of British farmers and the British food industry—not the generosity of the taxpayer.’ However, the taxpayer did have a role in promoting environmental stability, and the Government was committed to a system where, by 2020, ‘public funds are used only for public goods that the market cannot deliver, in particular, environmental benefits.’

The farming industry needed to make a positive net contribution to the environment, notably in respect of global warming, but also more widely. Like other industries, it needed ‘a paradigm shift’ if it was to account for environmental cost, and this created opportunities as well as burdens. He envisaged that the successful farming industry of the future would have lower resource use, notably in respect of nitrogen. It would pollute water, air and soil less, and play a key role in reducing ‘carbon intensity’ by means of energy crops. It would also need to reduce methane emissions, through animal genetics, diets and manure handling. ‘If less, and play a key role in reducing “carbon intensity” by means of energy crops. It would also need to reduce methane emissions, through animal genetics, diets and manure handling. ‘If less, and play a key role in reducing “carbon intensity” by means of energy crops. It would also need to reduce methane emissions, through animal genetics, diets and manure handling. ‘If less, and play a key role in reducing “carbon intensity” by means of energy crops. It would also need to reduce methane emissions, through animal genetics, diets and manure handling.’

Mr Miliband suggested that there were five challenges that farmers needed to address in facing up to the future. First, he said, ‘Big is not necessarily beautiful, but small is vulnerable’, so farmers needed to consolidate or cooperate. Secondly, they needed to ‘move up the value chain’ and create more value in the goods produced. They also needed to diversify into new sectors and innovate, ‘notably in the environmental field as they farm energy, farm water and farm carbon as well as farming food.’ They needed to differentiate their products and ‘reconnect’ with consumers. Finally, they needed to see climate change as an opportunity, not just a threat. ‘Climate change creates problems but we will need to be able to adapt. If UK farming prepares now for the future, it can get ahead. The UK can become leaders in green farming, developing solutions that reduce the use of natural resources and reduce pollution.’

It is possible to take issue with aspects of the Secretary of State’s speech. For example, one might question whether a shift in emphasis away from increased production is necessarily appropriate at a time when global demand for produce is expected to increase. The president of the NFU, Mr Peter Kendall, remarked at the conference that he wanted to see ‘a strong, productive, dynamic and competitive industry that places its environmental responsibilities at the heart of its activities – not one that winds down production for others to take up the market, which is tantamount to us importing the goods and exporting the problems.’ For all the concern about the environment, one might also ask about the extent to which markets can be expected to deliver ‘public goods’ in other areas, such as food safety and animal disease control. However, assuming Mr Miliband’s vision describes the direction in which farming is heading, what will be the veterinarian’s role?

Unfortunately, there was little specific mention of animal health and welfare in the Secretary of State’s speech, although he did make the by now familiar point that there needs to be a ‘fundamental shift in the relationship between government and the livestock industry to achieve better management of animal disease risks’ and that ‘the best people to have responsibility are those at the front line, with improvement in animal husbandry standards starting at the farm level’. Veterinary farm health planning will have an important role to play in this and will help farmers compete economically as well as leading to improvements in
animal health. Product differentiation and a ‘move up the value chain’ also require an input from veterinarians, who can help provide the kind of assurance on animal health and welfare standards which, we are told, future markets require. Environmentally, too, vets can have an input, whether in advising on issues such as wildlife management or, with their knowledge of animal production systems, advising on better use of resources and how to deal with animal waste. As the emphasis shifts towards meeting environmental objectives, this is an area in which they could play a more prominent role in the future.

In propounding a shared vision for the future of farming, Mr Miliband made clear that the status quo was not an option; farmers must innovate and diversify, and grasp the opportunities available. Vets can help farmers meet some of these challenges. If this is the way the industry is going, vets will have to innovate and diversify too.

* The full text of Mr Miliband’s speech is available at www.defra.gov.uk/corporate/ministers/speeches/david-miliband/dm070103.htm