Trade fears dominate farming reform

The newly published Agriculture Bill promises the biggest reset in British agriculture since the 1940s. With the environment at its heart, its centrepiece is a new farm payment system that will reward farmers with money for ‘public goods’, such as better air, cleaner water, higher animal welfare standards, improved access to the countryside or measures that reduce flooding (see page 80).

This so-called Environmental Land Management will be phased in over a seven-year transition period from 2021 and eventually replace the current subsidy system of Direct Payments in England. This pays farmers according to the total amount of land they farm and, as a result, has tended to skew payments towards the largest landowners rather than those farmers delivering specific public benefits.

It is the second time the bill has been put before parliament. The first time was in September 2018 under former environment secretary Michael Gove, when he hailed his proposed reforms as an ‘historic moment’ for farming, providing an opportunity to ‘deliver a Green Brexit’.

It met its death during the Brexit chaos and prorogation. However in its second iteration there has been no vast shift in the government’s thinking. The bill has the same environmental focus and payment reform plans but there are a handful of additions such as a commitment to monitor and improve UK food security as well as improvements in tracking livestock movements between farmers.

The current environment secretary Theresa Villiers is in a very different position politically and can be confident that it will become legislation without major amends, due to a significant Conservative majority in the Commons.

But it may not be all plain sailing for the government. The bill has a significant omission: there is no binding commitment to prevent trade deals that allow the importation of food produced to lower standards than would be allowed by UK farmers.

As we reported last week, farmers and environmental campaigners alike fear that British farming could be sold out in a lucrative trade deal with a country like the USA, for example, where there are lower standards of food safety and animal welfare regulations.

This week Minette Batters and Friends of the Earth wrote a joint letter to Villiers arguing there was ‘no good reason’ for the government not to write into law protections against chlorine-washed chicken and hormone-treated beef from the USA.

And in a letter responding to an editorial in The Times extolling the virtues of opening up our market to American chicken, the BVA stated: ‘Importing cheaper food from countries that allow poor welfare seriously risks undermining British farming.’

This is something that the BVA has also been consistently clear about. Before the bill was published, president Daniella Dos Santos asked for a firm commitment that goods produced to lower standards of animal health and welfare will not be permitted into the UK market.

This single issue is likely to be a persistent backdrop to trade talks throughout the Brexit transition period, which commences next week and runs until 31 December, and beyond that into the post-Brexit era (there is still much work to do to secure trade deals with countries outside the EU, for example with Canada and Japan).

And there are a number of other questions and details that need ironing out. For example, how exactly will public goods like biodiversity, animal welfare and carbon sequestration levels be measured? The Tories have been consistently critical about the Common Agricultural Policy system, saying it is bureaucratic, but this will require a bureaucracy of its own.

In terms of animal welfare, will vets be turned into effective gatekeepers of the subsidies? Would they be comfortable fulfilling that role?

Also, it will be interesting to see how the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland respond. Since agriculture is devolved, they have the ability to design their own systems – which may, or may not, tally well with what has been decided for England.

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