See below Hubert Lees letter to his Wantage MP, David Johnstone expressing his disappointment that he voted against Amendment/Clause 2. Followed by the transcript of DJ’s statement in the House of Commons and Hubert’s comments. This is then followed by DJ’s comments on Hubie’s comments. I am sending this to show that MPs do engage if you write personal letters.

Dear David,

I know you care about farmers and sustainable agriculture so I was surprised and sorry to see that you didn’t vote for Neil Parish’s amendments in the Agriculture Bill that would have ensured that we don’t import food from America that would be illegal to produce in the UK. The Sustainable Food Trust (SFT), along with many NGOs and farm groups like NFU and CLA saw these amendments as rectifying significant deficiencies in the Bill, its failure to feature food and farming in any meaningful way and it's lack of commitment to agroecological practices and food security. The SFT joined a historic coalition between farming, environmental and animal welfare organisations, convened by the NFU, to call on MPs to ensure vital safeguards for UK farmers were included in the Bill.

It is shocking that the conservatives voted down these and other amendments during the Bill's Third Reading in the House of Commons on Wednesday, putting the UK on a worrying course towards free trade agreements and low standard imports. The opportunity to support the adoption of sustainable farming practices across the whole farm, not just around the edges, is also in danger of being missed entirely with a piece of legislation which currently fails to integrate food production and environmental protection.

As Minette Batters, President of the NFU, says, “Agriculture has to speak with one voice as we look to leave the Common Agricultural Policy,” emphasising that, “We have to get it right.” She calls for an annual review of UK food security and says, "Not to learn the lessons from Covid-19 would be a failure."

With your love of farming and rural culture, I am sure you will enjoy listening to Minette and Patrick Holden (Director SFT), SFT podcast discuss issues such as the coronavirus pandemic, why the Agriculture Bill and future policy must prioritise a secure and sustainable food supply, and the potential for re-establishing the local food agenda, the role of livestock in sustainable farming systems, and whether or not food should be considered a public good.

I have transcribed your speech on May 13th and put my comments after my initials HL. I have also highlighted in yellow where you ‘hope’ things ‘might' happen. Farmers want to be sure of their future and so need the government to guarantee that benefits that will accrue from the Agriculture Bill into
law so we don’t see our market flooded with food products that undercut our farmers.

Best wishes,

Hubert Lees

David Johnston (DJ) speaks in Agriculture Bill debate - 13/5/20
Length - 3.43
Start time in House of Commons - 16:45
Hubert Lees (HL) comments

David Johnston: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker and here in Wantage I can in fact hear cows mooing from where I sit speaking to you so this is very relevant to my constituency. Starting with imports, it’s fair to say that right the way across Wantage and Didcot we have first rate farming, Brimstone Farm in the west of the constituency being just one example. The food, the environment, the agricultural welfare standards are extremely high. And it’s fair to say that a number of my farmers would like to see me support some of the amendments this afternoon, particularly New Clause 1 and New Clause 2.

HL Surely the farmers know their industry best and if they are recommending that you agree with New Clause 1 and New Clause 2, why wouldn’t you do it?

DJ and I’ve thought hard about that and felt pulled in the direction but in the end I’ve decided not to because even if it provided a short term help and I’m not sure it would - even if it was compatible with WTO rules - and I’m not sure it is –

HL If you listen to the MPs, not least Neil Parish, you will hear them say that demanding trade ‘equivalents’ with trading countries is compatible with the WTO

DJ I don’t think in the long term it would help our exports for the great farmers we have here and all the way across the country.

HL Why do you not ‘think’ it is sensible to protect in law the food, animal welfare and environmental standards, while at the same time exporting the same high standard food, and other things? If you don’t safeguard our standards, farmers will be undercut and you won’t have any farmers to export their produce. That is until you reduce our standards so that we can get enormous and poor standards so can compete. Also Covid-19 and lockdown has shown how important it is to have resilient farming in the UK to feed our nation of nearly 70 million people. We are presently exporting and importing almost exactly the same products. Surely we should be encouraging people in the UK to continue in their new found preference for British and seasonal and not be encouraging long food chains of insecurity, fragility and fraud.

DJ One point on food security though and the five year requirement to report on that is that, whilst that’s a minimum requirement, I do hope that we will hear about food security a lot more regularly than that.

HL Are you therefore voting for this amendment? Surely that would be better than you just “hoping”?

DJ Turning to public money for public goods is one of the most exciting pieces of this legislation and in fact makes it one of the most exciting pieces of legislation in my judgment. The fact that we will be entirely changing the system of paying farmers and be able to do so in a way that helps protect our environment. Farmers are the natural custodians for our environment and being able to support them to improve our air quality, our soil quality, our water quality, our biodiversity is a hugely welcome development. Maybe, just maybe, it might help to reverse the average age of farmers which we know at the moment is 60. They find it very difficult to persuade their children and grandchildren to take it on - maybe this is a step that might help to encourage others to maintain the land for these great purposes that support our efforts on climate change.
Surely younger generations are not going into farming only because the farm gate price is so bad? This is partly because the supermarkets source from the cheapest on the market so import from countries with lower standards as well as lower currency value. Under CAP, in the UK, £3billion was paid in subsidies and £2.6 billion spent by the taxpayer to clean up the true costs in terms of human health and pollution. See this True Cost Accounting by The Sustainable Food Trust. This will happen less with public money for public goods unless our farmers are forced to compete with produce that undercuts our standards. Then we are back to square one having to compete with farmers from the US and other countries whose record on food safety, workers rights, animal cruelty, antibiotic use, pollution and sick people is shocking. NFU says that 60% of farmers voted for Brexit because they wanted to have a market that paid them sufficiently to sustain a family and not have to compete with cheap factory farming in Eastern Europe and other giant systems that would be illegal in the UK. To compete our farms are already getting ever larger but this is not the choice of the farmers, local people or consumers. I listen to the debate from May 13th with MPs from both parties deeply concerned about leaving out the need to protect our standards in the Agriculture Bill. The farmers you are ignoring should be represented by the MP that promises to protect their standards and if it is not in law in the Agriculture Bill, how can you guarantee that promise? I have highlighted every time you ‘hope’ - if in law, you dont have to hope - you and more importantly the farmers, will know.

In future some people may try to minimise the food production aspect of that, I hope that doesn’t happen because that should not be seen in contrast to the efforts on the environment, these are mutually beneficial things that we can do together with this new bill.

Surely rather than hoping you could vote for the amendment that ensures that the Bill makes food production a priority rather than thinking that it should be part of the so called free market.

Thirdly turning to exports, I was one of the people who voted to leave the European Union and was then surprised to be told that meant I believed in a closed society rather than an open one. On the contrary, I wanted an open society and one that was open to more than just the EU.

Your voters voted for Brexit to give them the freedom to produce for their market, not to clamber for global markets by getting giant and having to reduce their standards in order to compete.

I’d like to see British products in countries all around the world

Why do you want to see British food in countries all around the world? What is wrong with people in every country growing their own food and seeing resilient local markets thrive? We must differentiate between food and other products like cars or renewable energy infrastructure, that you may like to see for sale abroad.

and I hope we’ll do everything we can to ensure that. I do think there’s an opportunity on food labelling at the end of the transition period so that we can clearly define and consistently apply food labelling that demonstrates and signals to the world how high the standards that we have here in this country are

I hope you voted for the amendment that demands that we have a better method of production labeling? Better labeling is leaving it to the busy shopper to find out about every aspect of their food. Shoppers want to trust their food, this will be a thing of the past.

and I also think there’s undoubtedly more we can do to promote our exports - we have the Food is Great campaign - I hope we turbo boost that in the coming years.

‘Food is Great’ is only great if it is of a high standard, the workers are taken care of, the animals are well looked after, the antibiotics given are near zero, the air, soil and water isn’t polluted by excessive amounts of slurry from giant factory farms etc etc all practices that the UK is struggling to be good at but when we have imports from countries that have abysmal records like the USA, how can our farmers compete.
**DJ** My last comment is just to remember the small farms in this because this is a tremendous opportunity for our farms here and I **hope** that we will support them with their contracts, with the promotion of their goods so that they too can benefit from this groundbreaking legislation.

**HL** Small farms are not going to survive unless we stop food from gargantuan farms that don’t pay their true costs from coming into the UK. This is the bill your farmers are asking you to put this legislation into to protect them. If you wait to put it in a trade bill, these amendments will be considered out of scope. For your farmers to compete, you will be forced to change the laws we have spent decades of campaigning for. Only when you lower our standards will your farmers be able to pour more chemicals on the soil, grow GM crops, incarcerated more stressed animals needing more prophylactic antibiotics to keep them alive, more neighbours up in arms from the stench, flies, juggernaut lorries blocking country roads with squealing pigs heading to market and feed heading into the farm and more viruses and bacteria coming out of the shed to create yet more pandemics. Then your kids will ask you what you did to prevent this catastrophe?

David Johnstone’s (DJ) response to the letter above and Hubert’s (HL) comments

From: **JOHNSTON, David** <david.johnston.mp@parliament.uk>

Date: Thu, 28 May 2020 at 17:02

Subject: RE: Agriculture Bill

To: Hubert Leese <hubie@farmsnotfactories.org>

Dear Hubert,

Thanks for your email. It’s quite a strange feeling to have your speech in such a way! I did look into these clauses but I was satisfied with the Government’s assessment of them (as were all but 20 of my colleagues). I set out their analysis below:

David Johnstone (DJ) · All food coming into this country will be required to meet existing import requirements. At the end of the transition period the Withdrawal Act will convert all EU standards into domestic law.

HL This commitment will only last the duration of this Government – not a good guarantee for farmers.

DJ These include a ban on using artificial growth hormones in both domestic and imported products.

HL The Americans use Paylean, (ractopamine hydrochloride), a beta agonist to make the pig grow 18% faster. this makes the pig hyper energetic and weakens it bones frequently to the degree that it cannot stand up any more.

DJ Nothing apart from potable water may be used to clean chicken carcasses. Any changes to these standards would have to come before parliament.

HL Strange how some politicians say exactly the opposite! Have you listen to all the presentation from May 13 in the House of Commons?

DJ Amendments NC1 and NC2 would, if passed, have significant unintended consequences which go beyond our current standards on food imports.
HL What is wrong with going beyond our current food import standards. Did you listen to Owen Patterson’s comments about our slaughter houses - “Look at videos or better go and look, and they will be horrified when they see what many of our livestock go through”.

DJ The supply of certain products would be severely disrupted, if goods that meet our current import standards were to be blocked, including goods we import now from the EU.

HL If these goods are substandard, of course there is good reason for their being disrupted.

DJ NC1 and NC2 would affect UK exports to countries where we have not yet signed a continuity agreement. The extra conditions in these two new clauses could result in countries refusing to roll them over. For example, this would risk whisky exports worth £577m a year.

HL We presumably produce goods that other countries want to buy. So why are you so worried that they will decide not to buy from us cos we are simply fulfilling EVERYONE’s desire for high food standards across the world?

DJ Another example is the impact it would have on our potato farmers – 22% of UK potato exports go to those countries with whom an agreement has yet to be signed.

HL If they want our potatoes they will sign with us. If not, let them grow their own and so be more food secure.

DJ In addition, because of the prescriptive nature of these clauses, it is too difficult for the Government to comply before the end of the transition period.

HL Then we must extend the transition period – surely you owe it to your farmers and to your constituents to keep a sustainable farming population on this island. Imports of lower standards than we allow in this country will bankrupt our farmers. Or you can lower our standards to level the playing field and end up with a food system that will give you and your kids allergies as suffered by most people in the USA.

DJ I’d be delighted to come and visit your farm at some stage after the lockdown restrictions have been lifted and we talk about this and other matters.

HL no need to wait to the end of lockdown as it might be too late. How about a visit via Zoom asap??

Best wishes,

David

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