

All change at the top?

The new Prime Minister will have a lot on his plate. If it is David Cameron (or Nick Clegg) I imagine that the first few weeks will be spent trying to understand the true complexities of leading a country already fighting a war in Afghanistan while attempting to implement a plan which starts to address a set of economic conditions not experienced for generations. Only time will tell how successfully these, and other, critical issues are dealt with. Certainly as far as the latter is concerned I think we have already got used to the idea that we will be worse off after the inevitable tax increases are applied – let’s hope there is enough left for a few of those necessary indulgences!

We can only speculate on how the new government is going to set about trying to fix the country. At the time of writing it is not at all clear who the election winner is going to be so attempting to comment on what, if any, changes lie ahead for the farming industry is probably a mistake. However some time spent reading the election manifestos gives us a feel for their policies and perhaps an indication of what direction they see our industry taking. The following summarises their respective positions:

Conservatives

- Want to create a more effective system of environmental stewardship;
- Aim to ensure consumers can choose non-GM foods;
- Wish to support reform of the CAP to “deliver greater value for money while sup-



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porting the sustainability of British farming”;

- Want to dismantle market distorting subsidies at a pace that allows time for British farmers to adapt;
- To control badgers in areas with high incidence of TB;
- To improve “honest” food labelling;
- To abolish the Agricultural Wages Board;
- Introduce an independent supermarket ombudsman.

Labour

- Want British farming to be profitable and competitive;
- Wish British farmers to produce more food;
- Seek to reform the CAP to create fairer and better functioning agricultural markets to enable farmers to return reasonable profit at lower cost to the consumer;
- Will create a supermarket ombudsman;
- Wish to improve food labelling.

Liberal Democrats

- Wish to increase the general right of access to the countryside;
- Say that “it is important to Britain’s future security that the country has a sustainable farming industry”;
- Will create a supermarket code and an independent regulator of Britain’s food market;
- Introduce a minimum level of Single Farm Payment (SFP) and concentrate reductions on the highest claims so that big land owners get less and the money goes to working farmers;
- Work within Europe to reform the CAP. More support to be targeted at conservation, the environment and tackling climate change, as well as providing food security for a rapidly growing world population. Organic and reduced input food-stuffs should be encouraged;
- Label food more effectively.

You can be forgiven for finding it difficult to distinguish between them – all three share some common policy:

- To reform the CAP while maintaining a profitable and sustainable farming industry and simultaneously providing better value to consumers! In other words they all want to pay less subsidy, make food even cheaper to the consumer and expect farmers’ profits to be maintained. Really!
- To introduce a Supermarket Ombudsman. This could be a positive development if it

means that Tesco, Sainsbury and Asda are forced to pass a greater share of the profits from food retailing to the primary producer but will be a very bad development if it just means that consumers get even cheaper food because you can bet that it won’t be the supermarkets profits that get squeezed.

- To label food honestly. This could also be positive for the UK farmer if it means that the consumer understands where food has come from and even better if the same consumer can then distinguish between foods produced responsibly from food that is not. It might even encourage more consumers to buy British.

If the manifestos give an insight into the future for UK farming then it is possible to conclude that, no matter who is in power, the shape of the subsidy system is likely to change. If subsidies are more closely linked to beneficial environmental management practises then adapting to these requirements will probably make financial sense.

However, for those unable (or unwilling) to take this direction then the annual subsidy pot is likely to be less full than it has been. In the short term it seems unlikely that any deficit will come from higher output prices – all parties seem intent on keeping food prices low. Therefore finding ways to reduce production costs and also generating even more income from other sources will be even more important.

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