

The *Sun* isn't my usual paper of choice, but I couldn't help notice a huge advert on the front of it recently.

"Thank you to British Farmers," the full-page message from the supermarket Morrisons proclaimed, recognising the sterling work done by farmers keeping food on the nation's tables during the coronavirus crisis.

The full fallout from the pandemic won't, of course, be known for months, if not years. What we do know is that the human cost in terms of deaths will be incalculable, even before the tragedy of lost jobs and bankrupt businesses is considered.

In this context, it's hard to find any good news, but one silver lining of this whole terrible cloud is that farming could be permanently repositioned in the nation's psyche.

As Britain went into lockdown, as supermarket shelves emptied and people – understandably – feared for their next meal, we collectively remembered the role of the farmer in terms of keeping food on our tables.

In terms of sparking a new sense of perspective, comparisons were made with the Second World War. In what for many has been an era of plenty, we again focused on what constituted 'essentials' and what were 'luxuries'. Food, like health, was at the very top of the 'essentials' list.

Now isn't the time for the agricultural industry to try to make political capital out of the situation. This isn't in farmers' natures and, in truth, most are too busy trying to get through the next few months. But hopefully consumers and politicians will have been reminded about the 'key worker' status of those who, quietly and without a fuss, have carried on doing what they do best – producing safe, top quality and traceable food to the highest welfare standards.

Those who remember it – and our historians – tell us that the general sense of goodwill towards farmers in the years after the Second World War was a result of their efforts during those dark days and contributed to a slew of favourable agricultural policies.

While we mustn't inadvertently give the impression that the agricultural sector considers itself somehow

AGRICULTURAL POLICY COULD BE 'REWRITTEN'

more 'key' than the many others – NHS staff spring to mind, for example – who have stepped up to the plate so selflessly in this national emergency, the crisis has reminded us how much we need a vibrant farming and food sector that gives the population ready access to safe, affordable food.

I've also noticed a marked decrease in the farming-bashing that can be pervasive on social media. Instead, there has been an acknowledgement of – and gratitude for – the role these families are playing in keeping their communities fed and safe in these difficult times. I've read heartening tales of farmers acting as the 'glue' of their communities, keeping elderly and vulnerable people supplied with essentials.

I also saw a poll in the farming press asking readers if they felt footpaths should be closed. In this climate of fear and uncertainty, it would have been easy – understandable, even – to answer 'yes'. More than half of respondents, however, felt they should be kept open to allow the nation to responsibly spend time outdoors and get the fresh air and exercise mandated in the government's advice. Actions like this help cement farmers' position in the nation's hearts and minds.

For businesses facing acute financial hardship, the old adage that 'fine words butter no parsnips' will seem particularly apt at present. Any shift in policy will come too late for some businesses, already entirely reliant on BPS to make the difference between profit and loss.

Enterprises needing seasonal labour from the EU, those relying on visitor and events-based diversification incomes and dairy producers are among those in the toughest position. And while coronavirus has less of an immediate, direct effect on the bottom line of many arable businesses, the wet autumn and winter has left many facing huge challenges anyway.

The situation has reminded me of the importance of a 'bird in the hand' and the value of 'guaranteed' income, in as much as any income can be in today's unpredictable world.

Hard as it is to plan for the medium and long term when many businesses are fighting for their short term survival, now could be a not-to-be-missed opportunity to consider a Countryside Stewardship application.

The scheme has rightfully had its share of bad press but, with the closing date approaching (the deadline for Mid-Tier applications is 31 July, and if you're requesting an application pack by email or phone you have to do that by 31 May), there is an additional appeal to the guaranteed income stream that such a five-year agreement could provide in a period of uncertainty.

All the more reason, too, that when the payments available under the Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) are eventually announced, they should properly reflect the importance of the work – whether that's feeding us, keeping our drinking water clean, keeping our air fresh or providing a biodiversity-rich, climate change-combatting environment.

There will be many competing, and some entirely justified, demands on Treasury coffers over the coming years, but perhaps there could be a fundamental shift in the policymakers' hierarchy, with agriculture moving upwards. Long-term, that would help the fortunes of individual farms, even if the sad truth is that some businesses will fall by the wayside in the coming weeks and months long before they are able to benefit from it.

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