

## Minette Batters



President, National Farmers' Union **February 2018 – Present**

Deputy President, National Farmers' Union **February 2014 – February 2018**

11 May 2021

### The referendum campaign

---

**UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE):** As David Cameron committed to having the 2016 referendum, first in the Bloomberg speech, but then after the success in the 2015 election, what was on farmers' minds? We know that farmers took different views on the referendum, what were people really thinking about in that run-up to the 2016 referendum?

**Minette Batters (MB):** In the run-up, I think we were beginning to think, 'This is pretty difficult for a membership organisation'. We had a lot of members who were saying, 'You're going to have to take a position'. We had other members who were saying, 'You cannot take a position', or, 'If you do take a position, it must be vote Remain', or, 'It must be vote Leave'.

So, I think we pretty soon realised that this was going to be difficult. But that didn't stop us from getting stuck in. I think I'm right in saying that we were one of the first trade bodies, across any sector, to commission economic analysis and absolutely the first in the agri-food space. We went to Wageningen University, a world leading Dutch University with experience in running agricultural trade models. That in itself was controversial with some of our members, but the expertise wasn't in the UK, economic analysis of trade deals was something the European Commission was responsible for.

We asked the Wageningen team to carry out an economic impact assessment of what our departure would mean, and to show the effects on markets if new trade barriers were constructed between the EU and the UK. Knowing where the Treasury had been, having made clear over the last 11 years that if there was the chance, they would remove direct support payments to farmers, we also wanted to know what that would look like.

That Wageningen piece of research was enormously helpful in how we continued to have the conversations with our members, across our democratic structure, because the NFU is totally democratic in the way that it operates and having independent economic analysis helped underpin the evidence base.

**UKICE:** The perception, for those of us that don't know, is that a lot of farmers did vote Leave, partly because they just hated the bureaucracy of the Common Agricultural Policy, and thought it got in their way. And yet the NFU ultimately came out to support Remain, but would not campaign for it.

I just wondered whether that perception of the farming sector is right, or if it was much more evenly split than that? And why did you decide on your ultimate tactic, as we headed towards the referendum?

**MB:** There is a lot of talk that says farmers voted unanimously Leave, but I don't think they were any different to anyone else at all. I think they were clearly split though. We recognised how split they were, but all sides were united in that they had a complete thirst for information. We knew that we had to be able to inform our members of facts. We also knew that campaigning on either side, for a membership organisation, would be really counter-productive. But do bear in mind that a precedent had already been set. My predecessor, Lord Henry Plumb, had taken a position when we entered the Common Market in 1973. He had said, on behalf of the NFU, that it was in farming's best interests to join the Common Market.

So, for us to have stayed on the fence without a position would have, I think, looked quite extraordinary. We decided that in order to be compliant with the Electoral Commission rules, which of course had limited spending for unregistered bodies to £10,000, that we would need to take a position to comply with those rules.

We had an extraordinary meeting of our council, which is our sovereign body, made up of two representatives, effectively, from every county across England and Wales. And we established some principles of what we were looking for, going forward, whether it was Leave or Remain. Those principles would guide the discussion.

So, we had a very good discussion at NFU Council in April 2016. Actually, Lord Plumb joined the discussion and Sir David Naish joined that discussion, as well as other previous Presidents. And the decision was taken, by NFU Council, the sovereign body of the NFU, that '*on the information available*' it was in British agriculture's best 'economic' interest to remain. But given the issues at hand went well beyond the economics argument, into issues such as immigration and sovereignty, it was also decided that the NFU would not campaign for Remain, nor would we advise our members how to vote. We did still have the practical issue though to register as either Remain or Leave with the Electoral Commission so as not to fall foul of the impending spending limits on our activity.

It's really key, though, to say '*on the information available*', to remain in the EU. It's worth pointing out that, at that time, there was not even one side of policy on A4 of what leaving the EU would look like. It was ideology based on three principles: A bonfire of regulation, the easiest trade deal in history, and more money for UK priorities, because we wouldn't be paying it into the EU.

So, that was really compelling. What was not to like?

**UKICE:** You don't represent farmers in Northern Ireland, because they're represented by the Ulster Farmer's Union. But I wondered what conversations you were having about the potential problems of what we now call east/west trade, and north/south trade, within the island of Ireland, if Brexit happened. Were they particularly worried about that?

**MB:** I think they were in a difficult position. Of course, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) believed so strongly in Brexit. I went out to the Republic of Ireland to the massive ploughing match that they have, talked with the Irish Farmers Association, as we have done for our entire time, within COPA-COGECA, and also visited the Northern Ireland border and our colleagues in UFU. And everybody was adamant that we could not have a border on the island of

Ireland.

In all these challenges, we knew that any border would have to be in the Irish Sea. And this, I think, still remains a very complex political issue. I think, on an official level on both sides, they could see the enormous challenge, but the decision that that had to be resolved was purely political.

I can't speak for the Ulster Farmers' Union. But I think, as the farming unions, we were all in the same place of wanting an approach that kept the UK internal market functioning fairly, and that there weren't winners and losers. That, above all else, United Kingdom farmers remained the number one supplier of choice to their own marketplace. So that, with as free and frictionless trade as could be achieved, was something that we all believed in then and we all believe in now.

**UKICE:** Had you anticipated the Leave vote, from where you live and from all the meetings you'd been having during the referendum campaign?

**MB:** In the end, as Deputy President of the NFU, I did take a public position, which was that, on the information we had, we would be better off remaining in the EU.

I remember going to bed on referendum night and texting our Director of Strategy, Martin Howarth, who has been with the NFU a long time, and was in our London Office. I asked what he thought as the Votes were just starting to come in then, and I think a lot of people were in the same position as me.

Martin said, 'I think it's going to be close but, without a doubt, it looks like we're going to remain'. So, I went to bed, went to sleep, woke up the following morning, and it was one of those situations – I've never done it before, I'll probably never do it again – whereby you did not believe the television. You were looking at, I think it was David Dimbleby and at the arrows and thinking, 'No, that can't be right'. And I was going out, putting on the radio, listening to Radio 4 and saying the same thing, going back in, looking at the television, thinking, 'This can't be right'.

That extraordinary feeling. And then, of course, just this wall of silence. That's what I remember most, nobody saying anything. So, I think everybody – no

matter what they say now – was in total shock at what had happened.

**UKICE:** When you got over the total shock and start regrouping, you're facing the prospect that, despite your stated position that, on balance, it was better for UK farming to remain, you're going to have to cope with the outcome of a Leave vote. Did you go back and say to the NFU, 'This is what we now need to do'? Or did you wait to see what on earth the Government did, to fill in this void?

**MB:** No, we immediately got our thinking together. We convened our council, our sovereign body, again, at a special meeting in London. It was then, that we established our new EU Exit and International Trade Directorate. We appointed Nick von Westenholz to head up a team of four specialist advisers to consider the implications and develop our strategy. We established that body, because we realised this was going to be massive, it was going to mean change, and we would have to think and operate differently, in order to satisfy our members' needs for knowledge on all of this. We then used the NFU Council, to identify the key issues, we brought together an options paper, and we looked at bringing together a whole host of task and finish groups.

We're such a big organisation, representing 50,000 farmers across England and Wales. We do have to be all things to all men, whether it's arable, livestock, dairy, horticulture plus all those cross-cutting issues of environment, land use, tenancy issues. Trying to make sure that we had all areas of our membership covered was absolutely critical. So, that's what we did in that very first instance.

And of course, we still had the Wageningen work, which proved to be pivotal in having those discussions, and the principles. Checking everything against the principles was pretty key, because if you are leading an organisation, which I wasn't then, Meurig Raymond was, it is really critical to have that solid evidence based foundation from which to operate, and from which to build our policy and lobbying position from.

## The May Government

---

**UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE):** You have a Conservative leadership battle that ends up with Theresa May becoming Prime Minister. Andrea

Leadsom, a leading light of the Leave campaign, moves over to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), to replace Liz Truss, and the establishment of the Department for International Trade (DIT), to show that new trade deals were going to be a big thing for the new government. We know that agriculture is always a big facet of trade deals, particularly with the people that the EU has failed to do trade deals with.

What were your early engagements with the new May administration like? Did it make a difference having Andrea Leadsom there?

What was your expectation about how the Government would involve farming representatives in the development of their position on Brexit, going forward?

**Minette Batters (MB):** It was interesting, wasn't it, when Theresa May came in? Straight away she ruled out being part of the Single Market, and we had those big speeches at Lancaster House, Mansion House, that were hard-line Brexit positions.

Our focus was always based on what agriculture needed. We were well aware then that agriculture is incredibly complex, and always the last chapter in trade deals to be achieved. I guess we needed to be able to get our point of view across, recognising that it didn't necessarily fit that well with the mantra of 'Brexit is great, because it's about cheaper food, cheaper clothes', which had been the mantra. You know, 'vote for this, because it will be cheaper'.

Yes, we did have very high-quality affordable food, the most affordable in Europe, the third most affordable in the world. But we had to get this right. So, it was incredibly important for me to get to speak to Theresa May, and we were trying to just get agriculture to register on the Richter Scale.

It was around that time, and certainly when I came in, that I said, 'We've got to start talking food, because food is what resonates with people, farming doesn't. So, let's talk about food, let's talk about the environment, animal welfare'.

With Theresa May, it was about trying to say, 'We're here, don't forget agriculture, because it's going to be the complex area'. And of course, goods have proved, with Agri-food in capital letters, to be the problem child in all of

this. I guess we always felt, in those early days, that a good Brexit effectively made agriculture the poster child of post-Brexit Britain.

**UKICE:** Theresa May was absolutely clear that Brexit meant ending free movement, but farming and food processing had been very dependent on Eastern European migration for a long time. How concerned were you about that part, as well as the trade side?

**MB:** Really concerned. The fundamentals that we had taken for granted – free and frictionless access to the largest trading block in the world, and free movement of people, which gave us access to a competent and reliable workforce – were front and centre. So, having been the preferred destination for European seasonal workers to come to, we now had this huge challenge that we were going to pull up the drawbridge.

We knew that, during Theresa May's time at the Home Office, she ended the global scheme, and that had been an exemplar scheme. We knew that we could have a global scheme, that it didn't all have to be about Europe, but with a reliance in the seasonal workforce, of 80,000 seasonal workers, to pick and pack and plant our fruit, veg and flowers. The dexterity of the human hand was essential.

So, there was that seasonal focus. Then there was the permanent focus, bearing in mind that successive governments have driven people out of doing what are deemed not to be 'office-based jobs', I suppose. It's been very much about get a degree, go to university, work in services.

We haven't prioritised different skill sets of job opportunity in the UK. In fact, we've probably actively driven away people from some sectors. I don't think that agriculture and food have been given, effectively, the opportunity to empower a UK workforce.

Because of the size of our population, because of the size of the sector, food and farming employs one in eight people. It's a massively significant employer. And of course, a lot of European workers were working within the food and farming sector, so that very quickly became, like trade, one of the things that we had taken for granted, that we were now very aware we couldn't take for granted anymore.

**UKICE:** We talked a bit earlier about the establishment of the Department for International Trade. As the May Government was starting to develop its vision of its Brexit, we had ministers, not least Liam Fox, talking about doing trade deals with the US, and the big summer 2017 bust-up over chlorinated chicken. How worried were you that the Government was very keen on a deal with the US? Or was that something you thought was a big opportunity?

**MB:** It was a worry in the context of how it was set out. We were hearing the mantra of 'it's going to be great because it's going to be cheaper'. Yet, we were seeing no sign of deregulating. In fact, the solid line from the NFU had been that we wanted to maintain our high standards of animal welfare. We knew it would be a lose-lose to try and lobby, effectively, for a race to the bottom.

So, Liam Fox was obviously very engaged at that time as Secretary of State at DIT on the opportunities of global trade. I remember sitting opposite him at a Sector Food Council meeting and George Eustice remembers this, I might add, as clearly as I do, because he was in the room, and Liam Fox saying, 'Brexit is going to be great, because we can bring in cheap raw ingredients and add value to them under the Union Jack'.

And I think George Eustice described this as seeing me have a sort of nuclear moment, where I nearly erupted through the ceiling. To undermine our farmers, when you want them to have regulation that costs a lot of money, and undermine them with cheap products coming in that don't even meet the first rung of the ladder, was going to do one thing, and that was going to put our farmers out of business.

There are a lot of high standards in America. California probably has higher standards than many parts of Europe. But for us, all the way through, it was about fairness, and making sure that trade was fair. What we wanted for this country should be, and still should be and must be, about what we want from other countries too.

So, it was never about an unfair approach and it was never about a protectionist approach. It was about saying that this needed to be fair and equitable to all. So, I think, then, there were some very tough conversations.

It's also so complex, this area. Trade is such dry policy, that a lot of people, particularly in the media, were not taking the time to understand it. So, very quickly, this debate became about chlorinated chicken. Which, of course, it should never have been, because that was about food safety and what we were wanting to talk about was food values, and the laws of our land.

The first country to implement animal welfare legislation was the UK. We had implemented laws that were based on food values, and yet we weren't prepared to look at that in other parts of the world. That was the frustration.

**UKICE:** You seemed to have managed to at least persuade Michael Gove, Secretary of State, of some of that, because he was on the other side of that argument with DIT that summer. But more generally, he was embarking on a quite radical reshaping of agricultural support and the post-CAP regime.

What difference did it make to you in engaging with the Government when Michael Gove, on rehabilitation into the Cabinet, took over from Andrea Leadsom, and started to make a lot of noise about what post-Brexit policy might look like?

**MB:** There was an element of, 'Goodness, what is this going to look like? Given he was one of the greatest proponents in the Brexit debate, of 'isn't it great, food is going to be cheaper'. But what I did see very quickly with Michael was someone who was very prepared to dive down into every area of technical detail and grasp it. You could say he brought a massive breath of oxygen into the department.

Officials suddenly became very energised, because they had someone who was really digging in on every area of detail. I have to say, at that time, that was so needed, because we had to work through a process. In order to work through a process, people had to understand the technical detail that underpinned all of this.

So, he was very prepared to roll up his sleeves. But his way of operating is what I would call 'big tent politics'. Bring everybody into the room, have a massive discussion, and then he would leave the room and you were never quite sure as to who had been listened to. Of course, if in effect you listen to everybody, then it does allow you the opportunity of going away and doing your

own thing, because you've got all these dissenting voices.

It was quite a new way of working, I think, in the department. And what I learnt quite early on, and has subsequently become a key element of NFU work, was that if you have a problem, work up the solution. Do not just go to government with X, Y and Z as a problem. Go to them, saying, 'This is the solution to that problem'. Michael was very bought into that.

I can remember challenging him at our February 2019 annual conference. We didn't want protection of our food standards written in blood, we just wanted it put in ink. We wanted government to put its money where its mouth was. So, he did, in the early days, in 2019, sign up to the importance of the Trade and Agriculture Commission, writing in ink that he agreed with the concept and would look to establish such a body. But then he left.

**UKICE:** Were you at all worried that he seemed to be establishing a rather surprisingly good relationship with the green lobby, who I think probably had a similar, 'oh my God', moment when he was appointed. But with his 'unfrozen moment' speech and things like that, were you worried that he was veering too much in that direction, and wasn't taking full account of the needs of food security or valuing food production?

**MB:** I can remember being on the Today programme, in Broadcasting House, with Michael Gove being interviewed, when he published the Agricultural Bill. I can remember, it was either Justin Webb or John Humphreys, saying, 'This isn't the Agricultural Bill, this is the Environment Bill. You don't mention food production, you don't mention agriculture, all you're mentioning is the environment'.

I think there was a sort of realisation then that, actually, they hadn't got this quite right, and they needed to be talking about farmers, about food production. I definitely felt that was a moment in time.

I remember reading the Defra press release the night before that interview, and it was a heart-stopping moment for me. I thought, 'Gosh, we're leaving the CAP and what is this? This doesn't talk about farming, this doesn't talk about food. What are my members going to be doing in future? And how is the state going to be able to pay for them to effectively just plant trees? It just isn't going

to work like that’.

So, there were, along this journey, some slightly heart-stopping moments, as to the road that we were on.

**UKICE:** How did you think the Department was coping? Defra had always been a slightly second, third, ranked department, partly because so much of its policy was run from Europe rather than domestically. It was one of the most affected departments by Brexit: did you get the sense that they could get the staff and resources they needed, or were they struggling through this?

**MB:** I think it was a phenomenal rebrand for the department, really. Michael Gove was perhaps not in his most ideal Cabinet seat, but I think he did manage to rebrand himself with what had been deemed to be a graveyard department, to the benefit of the department. Suddenly, the environment was rising up the agenda and everybody wanted a slice of it, and he was running the show.

For me, the issue was, ‘How do we pivot this back to the policies that are needed for sustainable food production?’. It is no good going to government, just saying, ‘I want’. You have to go there with what I used to describe to Michael a ‘magpie moment’, the glittery jewel that makes government think, ‘Oh yes, that looks exciting’.

That then was the reason for me saying at the Oxford Farming Conference in 2019, ‘Actually, do you know what? Agriculture is up for this global climate challenge. We can, as a source of emissions and a sink, go carbon-neutral, we can get to net zero. And more importantly, we’ll beat your target and we’ll do it by ten years’.

Michael didn’t know that we were going to say that, nobody in Defra knew that we were going to say it. I sat back down next to him and I said, ‘What do you think?’ And he looked at me, slightly surprised, and he said, ‘I think you’re very brave’.

What we wanted to do primarily was to open doors, doors that were shut due to some seeing agriculture as a problem. And what I wanted to say was, ‘Agriculture is the solution in all of this’. That worked, because everybody

opened the doors and said, 'Really? Beat government by ten years? How are you going to do that? What does that look like?'

We're still developing the thinking, still influencing, and with the academics and the science community working with us, we are making huge progress. But it's a classic case of, you've got to pitch people. If you want to find a solution, you've got to pitch them as a solution and you've got to work out what that actually looks like.

**UKICE:** Did you have any qualms about becoming NFU President in the middle of this process? Did you think, 'I need this like a hole in the head, I could just go back to my farm and live a quiet life, rather than get stuck into this political morass'?

**MB:** I did. I'd be lying if I said I didn't think that. What I did feel, and what I do feel, is enormous weight of responsibility to get this right. Because at the end of the day, the NFU is going to be pivotal in this major re-set moment. Agricultural Acts don't come along very often – 1947, 1920 – it's over a 70-year gap.

So, the need for the NFU to get this right, to not drop a ball, to be focused on what is needed, to be the lobbyist extraordinaire – ultimately, the weight of that falling on my shoulders has felt like a massive responsibility. It's one that I take incredibly seriously and one that does keep me awake for many a night, yes.

**UKICE:** So, the negotiations are going on. To what extent was the Government talking to you, or engaging with you, on its thinking on their common rulebook, which would obviously mean staying aligned to a lot of the agrifood regulations?

Were you at all engaged in the discussions there, or were you very surprised when the Government suddenly unveiled that as its preferred approach?

**MB:** What we'd been talking about, accepting that we were no longer going to be a part of the Single Market, was how free and frictionless trade was needed on both sides. As a net importer from the EU, and it being our most important export market, it was in the economic interest for farmers on both sides that we

added as little cost and friction as possible.

So, when I went and had my second meeting with Theresa May, it was to discuss her 'Chequers proposal'. And I remember her saying to me, 'I had no idea how complicated Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) rules were'. That was quite a moment of recognition for me.

That takes me back to the point where I said that trade policy is so complex, it's dull as ditch water, and so many people, politically, had not got to grips with the massive challenge, particularly the issues we would see on the island of Ireland. How do we resolve an issue that kept the United Kingdom together and allowed us, effectively, to transition into a new relationship?

Chequers, if I'm honest, allowed that to happen. The gnarly issues that remain today are still to be resolved, and who knows how we will resolve them. But Chequers, with its common rule book, allowed for that situation with the island of Ireland to be avoided, and it potentially paved the way for us to transition into an international trading relationship, but with the complexity of the deal with the EU and the UK sorted.

So, we supported Chequers, as, interestingly, did Michael Gove. And I think the likes of Daniel Kawczynski, too, supported it, on that very basis.

So, that was the conversation, literally, with Theresa May – she hadn't realised how complex SPS was. Having worked through the technical detail – and this is where I think Michael came into play – this became quite an obvious solution. But of course, politically, it was enormously challenging.

**UKICE:** We saw the very hostile reaction from EU political leaders to Chequers, but I wondered whether you got any sense from your sister bodies in France, Denmark, Netherlands, places that were concerned about UK lowering standards and the implications for that on agri-food farming, that they thought Chequers was quite a clever wheeze? Or did they think it was just a completely unacceptable attempt to cherry-pick the single market?

**MB:** I think, bearing in mind how vital our market is to them, they could see that it allowed a way through. So, from our point of view, it was important to have bilaterals with our opposite numbers and allow them to lobby their

governments on what was needed. And Chequers definitely gave way to those conversations happening in a constructive manner, without doubt.

I think the EU member states were always going to be deeply suspicious of us lowering food standards. They still are. We've always maintained that, in the UK, we don't want to lower standards, but there has always been a concern as to what imports and the future of international trade will look like. Chequers, I think brought a level of understanding. It was never going to be, for them, the same as remaining part of the single market.

**UKICE:** Chequers obviously didn't go anywhere and sunk at the Salzburg Summit, but Theresa May does land a Withdrawal Agreement and Parliament is not passing it. How were you involved in no deal preparations? Or did you think it was just so unthinkable and such a bad thing, that you weren't even prepared to talk about it with government?

**MB:** Well, it was well known, my constant mantra on no deal being catastrophic for farmers. That was primarily because of the WTO's Most Favoured Nations rules, where you can't have one rule for the EU and one rule for the rest of the world. So a no deal meant that we would be dealing with the EU the same way as we would be dealing with the rest of the world in the absence of any trade deals. On that basis, it was catastrophic.

The catastrophic part came from the fact that, with more than 70% of our exports going into the EU, we would face their very high tariff wall which, for agricultural products like beef and lamb and dairy, was an impossible economic ladder to climb and at the same time, as a nation we import more than 30% of the food we consume from the EU. The government was clear it would not countenance food price inflation, so the Temporary Tariff Regime was conceived

So, a no deal – and I will stand by it forever and a day – would have been absolutely disastrous for British agriculture.

**UKICE:** And were there any sensible preparations that you could do, or that you were talking about Defra doing, in that eventuality? Or did you, at that stage, think, 'This is so catastrophic, it's just not going to happen'?

**MB:** I think there was an element of thinking, 'They can never do this, because it will be so bad'. But there was also a level of thinking, 'Well, it could just end up being no-deal by default'. Everybody was putting down these legal markers, effectively. So, once you'd gone by those, you were into a no deal scenario by default. Would the EU have allowed things to carry on? Possibly. But I think, every time we treated no deal as a live reality, we had to prepare for it.

Now, what did preparation look like? From my point of view, I wanted to keep the market, the business, alive, bearing in mind that these are perishable products that we are dealing with. We didn't want farmers to go out of business. But Defra, government, really only focused on bail-out packages in a no deal scenario, that would allow farmers to effectively restructure.

There were no winners in a no deal.

**UKICE:** In March 2019, Daniel Kawczynski said he'd vote for the Withdrawal Agreement, given the negative prospects of no deal exit to the farming industry. I wonder if you thought you'd done enough to bring pressure to bear on individual MPs, as reputedly very effective lobbyists. Did you target any of the backbenchers who were holding out?

**MB:** We made continual calls, between Nick von Westenholz, myself and the other office-holders, with backbench MPs, talking about how dire a no deal would be. Don't forget, Michael Gove did not hold back in this arena, he is well documented and publicised. He said at our conference that it would be disastrous for farmers to have a no deal.

I tried everything. History will judge what we did harshly if we get it wrong, so we cannot afford to miss a beat. So, I think we engaged on every level. Of course, getting your voice heard in all of this was quite a challenge, I think, for the goods sector.

I always remember Faisal Islam saying that agriculture had managed to beat the rest of manufacturing in getting its voice heard in this arena. We ended up facing three no deals, essentially, in the end, all of which were avoided. I suppose you can say that, in the end, the voice was heard, even if it took three botched attempts to avoid it.

**UKICE:** Rather intriguingly, George Eustice, given his background, put down one of the indicative votes proposing UK accession to EFTA. I just wondered if this was done in concert with you – was this George Eustice acting as the NFU's representative in Parliament?

**MB:** No, it wasn't. We focused all our lobbying on, I guess, the outcomes that we wanted to see achieved, not our means of getting there by some of the existing avenues; the Single Market, customs union, EFTA. We just focused on, 'What we need is free and frictionless trade', which I think, for some, got quite annoying.

But it was always going to need a bespoke model. Effectively, that's what we've got now, with the Trade Cooperation Agreement. It's not perfect by any means. It has got friction, where none existed before. I still believe that in the longer term, we will have to find ways with the EU to deliver less friction, because less friction equals less cost and that's to the benefit of both sides.

**UKICE:** Did any of your members, who might have been inclined to support Leave before the referendum, have second thoughts? Or was it like the rest of the population, where views seemed to be fairly entrenched?

**MB:** I think there were some. We were put under a lot of pressure at various times to be part of the People's Vote, and call for another referendum. We never even got close to that. To our minds, this had been a democratic decision of the nation. 48-52% was always going to be challenging, divisive, but to have another referendum, we didn't believe would have made any difference at all.

I think there was a bit of a 'fait accompli' moment, that we live in a democratic country, democracy has been played out, and our focus was always on, 'How does this work best for British agriculture? What is needed?'. So, we put our energies into that, rather than trying to stop anything or have another referendum.

I think most definitely, in the run-up to those no deals, many farmers were thinking, 'This really does look terrifying'. In a farming business, when you're looking at the long-term, you're putting rams with the sheep, you're putting bulls with cows, you're planting crops, all of which are focused on the following

year, so you're having to plan a long time ahead. That was the challenge. You were planting crops and you were making business decisions, having no idea whether you had a market or not.

That was pretty daunting, I think, for a lot of farmers. You didn't know what your workforce was going to look like, you didn't know what the future policy was going to look like. Worst of all, you didn't know whether you had a market. Those three things together, for a long-term business- I would say, if you weren't worried then, you weren't actively engaged.

**UKICE:** Did you get a sense that government actually appreciated the lengths of those lead times in farming? We had a government that really believed you should take every decision up to the wire, and that was the way of getting a short-run better deal.

**MB:** I think, genuinely, probably nobody wanted it to play out how it's played out, which has been long and protracted and divisive. But ultimately, there were two sides to all of this, and the UK wasn't the only party in the negotiations. It was about achieving a new relationship, and that took a long time, as we know.

## The Johnson Government

---

**UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE):** Michael Gove was a relatively long-serving Defra Secretary of State, by Defra standards. But he was reshuffled when Boris Johnson came in. Was the move to George Eustice an easy transition? Do you think it signalled a significant change of direction? And, as someone quite well known to you, were you relieved that it was someone who had a track record on farming?

**Minette Batters (MB):** Well, George has been in Defra a long time. He was there as Minister of State for Farming beforehand, under Michael, so we knew George very, very well. I think there was an element of relief that it wasn't necessary to re-inform someone who came in totally new. He knew the Department inside out; he knew farming well. I think a lot of people were quite relieved to see George staying in the Department, with a level of continuity and knowledge of farming.

**UKICE:** But this was a government that made very clear that it was willing to contemplate no deal, to get out by 31 October. It launched some plans for new tariffs, which were quite interesting, and it also made clear that it was prioritising regulatory autonomy, sovereignty, over removing friction. How did you find dealing with the new team, compared to the May team? Did you get a sense they had very different priorities for the future?

**MB:** Yes. I mean, a big, big difference, and it continues to grow. Boris Johnson was operating from a seismic majority, and so they have the power base – to do whatever they want. I think it is always challenging when you work with a majority government.

When that government came in in December 2019, there was, I felt, quite a bit of rebuilding to do with backbench MPs because of Brexit. We needed to be able to work together, to shape what the future needed to look like. I think, by then, there was quite a realisation in the Johnson-led administration that food was important.

Within six months of that new government I was conscious that we'd led the standards campaign. What did the NFU want? The NFU wanted MPs to have more say on trade of agrifood. We wanted MPs to be able to know all aspects of those free trade agreements, what was in them, what the impact would be, and we wanted them, ultimately, to have the final say. Which is very similar to what they do in countries like Australia and America.

Well, we were just getting a flat no – 'Get back in your box and be quiet, because we've got a majority government and we can do what we want'. So, we kicked off this campaign. Of course, don't forget, then Covid-19 is hogging the news agenda, so it's even harder to get your voice heard.

We brought a massive coalition together of all farming organisations, nearly every NGO that is out there – animal welfare experts, consumer groups, Jamie Oliver, Raymond Blanc, Prue Leith. It was a formidable coalition. *The Mail on Sunday* agreed to help promote the NFU's standards petition.

So, in June 2020 we had over a million people in two weeks saying, 'We've got to have a Trade and Agriculture Commission, MPs have got to be able to have their say'. And we got that. But I was well aware that we'd burnt quite a

lot of bridges with people, who felt that the NFU had behaved badly.

I still look back on it as, fundamentally, my job is about speaking truth to power and getting what is needed for, not only the members, but consumers. The coalition showed that this was about consumers, this was about everybody believing in it.

We've had endless statements, from the Prime Minister, from Liz Truss and others, about, 'Britain's farmers will not be undermined in future trade agreements'. That was a manifesto commitment, don't forget, in the 2019 election – not to undermine our farmers in future FTAs. So, I continue to hold them to account on that.

**UKICE:** But they still prioritised doing deals with the US, though maybe receded slightly. And Australia's big, offensive asks on beef, certainly, maybe lamb. Are you worried by that?

Despite its majority force to put the Trade and Agricultural Commission on a statutory basis and other things like that, does the Government recognise it doesn't necessarily have a parliamentary majority for its vision of future trade in agricultural products?

**MB:** I still think that is undecided, effectively. I've met with the Australian negotiating team, and they are absolutely determined that they should have free access on beef and sheep. They have very different standards to us; they have big feedlot systems, they farm at serious scale. So, the Government has got to stick to its word on this. Australia is the sort of precedent FTA because that will be the first one, potentially, that is concluded.

So, I am enormously worried, because the Government has committed, publicly, time and time again, that it will not undermine our farmers. Yet we're hearing about a race to achieve a trade deal with Australia before the G7 Summit in Cornwall in June. I know where that negotiating team are, so, either one side or the other side has to capitulate between now and June. Will either one? I'm not so sure.

It's a tense time right now. Because whatever we allow Australia to do, don't forget we've then got New Zealand, we've got Canada, and of course,

overlaying all of that, we've got the Trans-Pacific deals. The Australian head negotiator heads up the Trans-Pacific negotiations as well. So, Australia is really just the start of what this is going to look like.

I have to say, at this moment in time, it is hard to see how we retain our levels of self-sufficiency, and keep our farmers with the same price structure, effectively, that they have at the moment. When I see the out-of-home sector has been offline, with everybody buying products out of retail, prices in the red meat are pretty good because retail has become very loyal to British sourcing, because the British consumer has demanded it.

If we go and dilute that massively, and have a flood of much cheaper imports, that is obviously going to undermine our farmers. That is a breaking of the manifesto commitment.

**UKICE:** Do you think the Department for International Trade and Defra now have a unified view, or is this battle still being played out within government, as opposed to outside government?

**MB:** No, I think it's an enormous challenge within government. I think Defra has very strong views on all of this, I know George Eustice does. They've been long-term involved in the impact assessment for these trade deals, so they know what is needed. The Department for International Trade, of course, is focused on getting trade deals done. I think the commitment was to get over 80% of the trade done in the term of this Parliament. They've got a lot to do.

My meeting with the Prime Minister in October last year, 2020, was absolutely pivotal in getting the Trade and Agriculture Commission over the line. At the end of the day, this will land on the Prime Minister's desk as to which way he wants to go. I don't think DIT and Defra are aligned in their thinking.

**UKICE:** When you saw the Northern Ireland Protocol that the Prime Minister had agreed to, did you anticipate that it was going to cause what appeared to be quite a lot of problems for east-west trade in agrifood products? Or did you think it was a clever solution to a seemingly intractable problem?

**MB:** I think we've always recognised, from day one, how difficult Ireland is. We've worked very closely with them throughout, so we've always known that

it is a very, very difficult area. And it's still not resolved, which just shows how complex it is.

If we're going to have checks in the Irish Sea to avoid a border, where do you do the checks? You've got all the challenges with Stranraer and other places about access points. I think it's still yet to be resolved as to what that looks like. I think officials have grappled with it and understood it for a long time, but politically, it's still very difficult.

**UKICE:** One way of making that operation much easier would have been to sign up to alignment, or greater alignment, on SPS in the TCA, but none of that really seemed to come to fruition. Were you very engaged with what the UK was looking for in the TCA on that?

**MB:** From the very beginning, we've been part of what have been called the F4 Groups. This is what Michael kicked off, effectively, with David Rutley, in the very beginning. These have been continuous weekly dialogue groups, with officials and ministers.

We've worked on emergency measures and everything else, but thankfully they were never needed. But that F4 group is still trying to work through these thorny areas. I had a call the other day, with COPA-COGECA, listening to the Commission and DG SANTE. Still the position remains today from our European partners that we must sign up to dynamic alignment of rules across the EU SPS area. Still, the same Chequers discussions are being played out.

What we feel is that the dialogue must bring a pragmatic solution at some stage. At the moment, their demand is that we sign up to follow EU rules and the Government, as you know, is clear that we will not sign up to that. So, it continues just to be a live issue that will have to be overcome, at some stage.

**UKICE:** In terms of getting ready, we had the negotiations going on, but there was a need to prepare for a rather uncertain change of regime at the end of 2020, when the transition ended.

The TCA landed on 24 December, with details to be filled in in some areas, while managing the pandemic. What did you think of that process, working with the Government on getting people ready for a whole bunch of really

complicated border formalities that they haven't had to bother with, to nearly as great an extent, over the last 45 years?

**MB:** Covid, in many ways, with food supply, helped, actually, because the engagement was there with agriculture and food and government. I think we all knew what problems were coming, but I think the challenge was, what was going to be done about them? And that still remains the challenge.

Covid, and the out-of-home sector being offline, is masking the issue at the moment, of what things will look like going forward. We've obviously got a lot of trucks coming over and a lot of trucks going back empty. What we are seeing played out – and it's showing more with fish – is that groupage is really difficult. To get to wholesale ways of trading, whereby you have one truck full of one thing, is going to be easier to resolve.

That is still ongoing, and we still don't know what the future of checks is going to look like. The EU, of course, are taking that to say, 'Products are coming into the UK so easily, not getting checked, this is going to be your policy for the rest of the world. So, that is why we want you to be part of the SPS area'.

It's sort of backfiring at the moment, and we still, I think, really need to know what the future is going to look like, and where the improvements are going to be. You also hear talk of having higher standards here, so being above the EU. Well, that will be really, really damaging. If we set the legislation bar above domestically, for international trade, that is just going to add more cost and price ourselves out of the market.

**UKICE:** At the moment, we have this sort of asymmetric border, don't we? Where the UK/ GB exporters face the full battery of checks going into the EU, and EU exporters are waved through at the UK border.

Have you been pressurising government-? Do you get the sense that this is a long-term policy, that the Government doesn't want to invest in the border? Are they worried about this unfairness to British producers?

**MB:** I think the biggest challenge, if I'm honest, is the number of different departments, different people, dealing with different things. You've got Lord Frost leading on the future of the UK new relationship. I haven't been able to

get a meeting with Lord Frost yet. You've got Liz Truss leading on trade with the rest of the world. You've got Defra, effectively, leading on border controls and things like export health certificates.

All sorts of different people, in different places, dealing with different things. Then we've got political issues, like seed potatoes- there is no reason why seed potatoes should be blocked out of the EU market. We've got higher standards, with many of the producers sitting above European level.

This has been a political decision by the EU and, to a certain extent, their line is, 'Well, we didn't want you to leave, we're entitled to make it difficult'. We've got significant issues with the absence of border control posts on the north European coast which means that we effectively can't move any farm animals from GB to mainland EU.

All of these issues need a pragmatic approach from both sides. And at the moment, what we are finding is that there are so many moving parts to the level of engagement with different trading partners. Some of which, like David Frost, it's been impossible to meet. I think it's essential that we can meet with him, bearing in mind we've still got active engagement with member states trying to resolve these issues.

I speak to my opposite number in France, Christiane Lambert, who is President of the FNSEA, the French version of the NFU, getting her to lobby the French government on why we need border control posts, Calais being pretty pivotal in all of this. It would help if we could speak to those who are leading these discussions.

**UKICE:** Are officials more accessible, if you can't get in to talk to Lord Frost?

**MB:** Lord Frost has been the difficult one to date. I have very good engagement with the Department for International Trade at all levels, and with Defra at all levels. There are different moving parts to all of these things that, I think, make it a challenge to resolve.

**UKICE:** We've got Defra about to implement the new farm payment scheme. Defra has obviously got form on implementation challenges, after trying to roll out what, on the face of it, was an easier payment scheme in the mid-2000s.

Are you convinced that they've got the capacity to make this work?

**MB:** I don't think we should underestimate the challenge you refer to of, not only piloting policy, but piloting delivery. At the end of the day, you can have the best policy in the world, but if you can't deliver it, it's a disaster for Treasury, it's a disaster for farmers. Ultimately, when we look at the delinking process, you are going to see 50% of direct support that will be capped in four years. For some sectors, if you take upland livestock, you're looking at an 80% drop in farm business income, which is enormous.

It means that the future absolutely has to be got right, and delivery has to work. We're talking about England only- are we going to have more complexity within the internal market?

Scotland is talking about maintaining the same levels of direct support, so an area-based payment linked to sustainable farming. Northern Ireland are looking like they will carry on with the status quo. Wales is almost in a slightly more similar position to England. What we want is four countries that are doing, effectively, the same thing, otherwise we will distort our own internal market.

We are really asking Defra to keep looking at the impact assessments. They, of course, looked at the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) impact assessment in 2018, so we're very much wanting them to look at that again. We have commissioned some independent research to look at the viability of the new schemes, of how much will be lost, effectively, from BPS, and how much can be made up through either the agri-environment schemes or through the sustainable farming incentive.

At this moment in time, it's lacking in detail as to what the future scheme looks like. We're now in May, and looking at these changes coming in for 2022. There is a lot of detail that needs to be progressed, and rapidly, for farmers to feel confident to get onto the new platform for next year.

## Agriculture after Brexit

---

**UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE):** We're now about five months into the end of the transition, five months into the new global migration scheme. How

does it feel for the industry? It's obviously still a strange time, because we've still got Covid. But does the farming industry feel that it's adapting okay, or are there surprising new challenges, unanticipated challenges, emerging?

**Minette Batters (MB):** It's a really odd bubble that we're living in at the moment. That, again, has been driven by Covid, because we've not been eating out in pubs or restaurants, everybody has bought everything out of retail. Retail is now very loyal to British sourcing, so we're seeing good prices across a range of agricultural products. Exports are down though, with specialist cheesemakers and products such as fresh cream taking a massive hit.

I think farmers are feeling reasonably optimistic at the moment. I guess it's knowing that you are going into a period of enormous change, but that change hasn't actually happened yet. It's only when commodity prices are impacted, and the future support mechanism is changed- if that isn't right, that is when things will start to erupt, and that is what we've got to try and avoid.

**UKICE:** We've heard about asparagus rotting in the fields, strawberries unpicked, daffodils unpicked. Are those scare stories, or is there a significant issue with labour shortages?

**MB:** No, it's a massively significant issue. Again, it was the engagement with Number 10 that got the global seasonal scheme of 30,000 over the line. We've now got the two licences in place for that. But our strawberries, our raspberries, our asparagus, our blueberries, are reliant on the dexterity of the human hand. We need people to harvest our fruit, vegetables, and flowers. There have been challenges.

The daffodil-growers in Cornwall will have faced enormous losses. We've got to make sure that we build what I would call bridges to more mechanisation, more automation. If we don't do that, we will see things rotting in the fields, simply because we haven't got the capability to pick them.

There are a lot of things that need to be done. We need to work collaboratively to incentivise a UK workforce. That isn't going to happen overnight, because we've actively pushed people away from doing those jobs. It doesn't mean to say that it won't come back, but it's going to take a lot of working together.

Fundamentally, we need to be producing much more of our fruit and veg here. Covid-19 has probably really shone a light on our diets, that a lot of them are not good diets, and we all need to have more fruit and veg in them. We've got the climate here to be growing it. I think, again, we need to be looking at producing more here. We're still going to need a workforce.

There isn't a silver bullet, but ignoring the situation and saying it isn't important is not a way forwards. We've got to be able to look at, actually, how we enable these growers to have access to the workforce that they need.

**UKICE:** If you look at the whole period together, farming is obviously one of those areas where the big decisions used to be taken in Brussels, but they're now being taken in a mix of London, Cardiff, Edinburgh. Has this led to a fundamental change in the relationship between the NFU and the governments of the different parts of the UK?

Has farming and agriculture gone up the government agenda in prominence, now that it's not just an obscure Agriculture Council that nobody really can understand, that comes back with a protected budget that gets implemented?

**MB:** You've absolutely hit the nail on the head, because nobody did understand it. And now, within the Agricultural Act of 2020, the Secretary of State for Defra has access to a multi-annual plan. So, the CAP was a multi-annual budget that sat outside of parliamentary cycles, so you got the budget, which I think annoyed others, in the NHS and education – why did agriculture have special treatment?

So, it's now going to be brought into the funding cycle of Parliament. That is going to be, I think, quite a challenge, especially on the back of Covid, in terms of making the case for future investment. We've legislated to achieve net zero, but there is so much that can be achieved through new policy thinking as to what that looks like, and ultimately, our opportunity to influence European thinking.

What we have to recognise is none of these things can be done in isolation. Climate change is a global issue, we've got to be able to do it collaboratively, with others coming with us. So, influencing is going to be important.

Whitehall has driven so much of EU rules and regulations for agriculture and the environment, so when we bring it back home, we've got to be able to make sure that it works across those four countries. I think we were quite at arm's length, I would say, from influencing the European thinking.

When you look at this country, 70% of it is rural. The NFU launched a levelling-up report, because when we look at the whole levelling-up agenda, it can't just be about north versus south, we've got to look at opportunity across the whole country.

And a support aid budget of £3bn, a lot of talk is made about that. It runs, I think, central government and its departments for under a month. So, in my opinion it's been a phenomenal return on investment and it can be an even better return on investment, if we all work together.

**UKICE:** Whether or not it was a majority of farmers, some farmers at least were keen to leave the EU. Do you think that the Brexit that has played out so far is at least meeting their expectations, in terms of what new opportunities it would bring?

**MB:** Well, Brexit won't be felt until it's happened, but the impact hasn't happened yet. Although we've left the EU, we've left transition, we haven't achieved trade at scale with the rest of the world, in any shape or form, nor have the aid schemes changed or been reduced yet. So, there is a lot of water, I would say, to go under the bridge before that question can be answered.

Still, what keeps me awake at night is this desire to raise standards here. You know, we've got a government that now is saying it's banning live animal exports, and it wants to have higher standards across the board of food production. I would pose the question – what does that mean for government buying standards?

At the moment, the Crown Commercial Service contract for the NHS, for prisons, schools, is set so low that you can't even get fresh produce into it, let alone free-range eggs. We can't have one standard for one and not for another. If government is going to introduce legislation on higher welfare, it needs to effectively put its money where its mouth is, and make sure that our procurement is only sourcing at those standards.

I think it poses big questions for international trade. Australia can move livestock not only across the country but across seas, thousands and thousands of kilometres, and we have just banned it here. If we're going to continue with a policy that is about raising standards in this country, and not asking the same for other countries, that's going to have big impact on our farmers and on our food system.

What we must avoid is a two-tier food system. We must make sure that even the poorest in our society have access to high quality British food, which they currently do.

The end of this will be judged in the years to come. There is a lot to lose if we don't get it right, and there is a lot to gain if we do it well. But doing it well means really working collaboratively with everybody in the food and farming sector.

**UKICE:** Just on that, the Government has also moved to be more flexible on using neonicotinoids than it was before-

**MB:** No more than the rest of Europe did. There were challenges across Europe and here with the weather that we have in the winter, so there was an application put in for emergency use authorisation on Cruiser neonicotinoid. It wasn't actually needed in the end, because the weather changed. But certainly France and other countries put forward the same thing.

**UKICE:** But it's also consulting, isn't it, on gene editing and other issues like that, which the Government sees as a big new possibility to appear more open to innovation than the EU. Do you think the Government has yet worked out – beyond some of the things you've been worried about like the ban on live animal exports – the opportunities of post-Brexit Britain, on regulating differently, more smartly, being more pro-innovation?

**MB:** I think innovation and research and development, effectively, are at the heart of everything, and certainly at the heart of getting to net zero.

On gene editing, yes, on plant breeding, it's a massive opportunity. But it isn't an opportunity if we lose access to the EU market. The EU are now really having these positive conversations, and the Commission has come out

positively, saying, 'Actually, on plant breeding, we've got to look at the opportunities around that resistant crop'. So, that is all good.

Don't get me wrong, I think the NFU is really optimistic about the future, we really believe we can be leaders in climate-friendly food production. But we've got to be able to do it in a way that has the right policies in place to deliver what's needed.

You've got to have agriculture as a key part of trade policy. Well, we still don't actually know, publicly, what trade policy is. We need a really transparent approach to how agriculture fits in all of this. At the moment, I feel we've got a lot of warm words, and we just need to know the nuts and bolts of what the genuine ambition is for this country. Because one thing is for certain, you can't be all things to all men.

Above all else, I want to see honesty to farmers about the road that they are on from our political leaders.