

Keynote speech by Commissioner Phil Hogan at NFU/CLA Stand on the occasion of his visit to the Kent County Show – 8 July 2016

Mr President (Meurig), Mr Deputy President (Tim), distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, it is a pleasure to be here with you today in *"The Garden of England."*

To say that it is an interesting time for a European Commissioner to be in the United Kingdom is something of an understatement! Allow me, therefore, to say a few words from the Commission's perspective as well as my own.

As the Commissioner for Agriculture & Rural Development and indeed as an Irishman, you won't be surprised to hear me say that I am disappointed that the UK has chosen to take this course of action, but I respect the decision taken.

Some of you will know that I made a couple of visits to the United Kingdom in the months before the referendum, during which I set out my views as to advantages that I believe accrue to British farmers from membership of the EU.

While, of course, I still maintain those views, today is not the day to rehearse those arguments. A decision has been taken and a process has now to be initiated to give effect to that decision.

So, we should now look forward and, in particular, we should look forward to the type of relationship that the United Kingdom and the EU will have in the future.

Prime Minister Cameron has made it clear that the timing of the triggering of Article 50 of the Treaty is a matter for his successor, whoever that may be.

The Presidents of the European Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission have expressed the view that they *"now expect the United Kingdom government to give effect to this decision of the British people as soon as possible"*.

I agree with the President of the European Commission when he expressed the view, which I believe is shared by many on both sides of the English Channel, that it is desirable that the position of the British government is clarified as soon as possible, in order that a prolonged situation of uncertainty is avoided. There can be no negotiation without notification.

While none of us has any idea of the nature of relationship that will exist between the UK and the EU after the UK's departure, we should be optimistic that we can build a new relationship as good neighbours. It seems to me that when much of the rhetoric on both sides of the debate is stripped away, that is what most people want.

When it comes to my own area of responsibility, nothing changes until negotiations are completed.

The EU joint declaration confirms that *"until this process of negotiation is over, the United Kingdom remains a member of the European Union, with all of the rights and obligations that derive from this."*

I want to send a clear message to farmers in the UK that, as long as the UK remains a full member of the EU, farmers will continue to have full access to the CAP support schemes and to the EU internal market for agricultural products. They are likewise expected to continue meeting their obligations and responsibilities.

I appreciate that the decision to leave the EU has created a lot of uncertainty for existing beneficiaries of EU funding, not least the 175 000 farmers currently benefitting from the Common Agriculture Policy.

As EU Agriculture Commissioner, I will continue doing my very best for those farmers and their vital work while the UK remains a full member. And I hope the arrangements put in place following the UK's departure maintain the central position of farmers in the rural life and economy of this country.

There are, of course, issues other than the receipt of CAP payments which will be of concern for British farmers during the period of continued EU membership. One such recent issue, which will have been of concern to virtually every gardener, let alone farmer, will have been the threat to glyphosate-based products.

I appreciate that it is a controversial subject among some quarters, but the recent re-approval process was one in which EU Member States failed to make a clear decision, knowing that their failure to do so would oblige the Commission to act.

Well, the Commission has now acted by proposing an extension until 6 months from the date of receipt of the opinion of the Committee for Risk Assessment of the European Chemicals Agency by the Commission or 31 December 2017, whichever is earlier.

This may not be an ideal outcome for users of the products, but I hope that it gives some comfort that the Commission has acted to ensure their continued availability.

My current work is very much focused on making the CAP work better, and work smarter, for our farmers. Simplifying the policy has been my number one priority and real progress has been made.

I'm well aware too that the issue of greening has been one of frustration to farmers in the UK and particularly among arable farmers here in Kent and in the south-east of England.

Having heard the concerns of farmers, I decided that a review of greening should also be part of CAP simplification.

We have now completed a review of greening after the first year of implementation. What we have clearly learned is that there is a need to simplify and improve the greening rules. There is undoubted potential for greening to deliver environmental and climate benefits and, to date, the experience is that it has had limited negative effect on production levels and market developments.

I believe there are a number of areas where we can make progress in the short-term to make the lives of farmers easier, without compromising the environmental performance of greening.

With that in mind, I expect to be in a position very shortly to propose several concrete simplification proposals, which will benefit farmers, at least for as long as the policy continues to apply to farmers in the UK.

In my experience as both a Minister in the Irish government (during which time I chaired the Environment Council) and, more recently, as Commissioner, I have consistently found the UK to be a constructive and fully engaged Member State and, until such time as the UK's withdrawal becomes effective, I expect that such an approach will continue.

Indeed, I welcome the message to that effect from Lord Gardiner at last month's meeting of the Council of Agriculture Ministers. Since I became Commissioner for Agriculture, I have met regularly with both the Secretary of State, Liz Truss, and the Minister of State, George Eustice.

I can assure you that both have been strong and effective advocates for UK farmers and the UK farming and wider agri-food industry. I look forward to an equally engaging relationship with whoever the new Prime Minister appoints to these positions.

Successive UK Ministers have influenced the development of the CAP in a positive way, with an emphasis on greater market-orientation, more focus on environmental protection and broader rural development policy.

As somebody now responsible for the policy and its development I am satisfied that this influence has improved a policy, which I would be the first to admit is far from perfect and which I am committed to improve, building on the direction towards which UK Ministers often pointed.

I have also thoroughly enjoyed a very positive and constructive relationship with your farmer representatives.

The National Farmers' Union has consistently been a strong voice on behalf of British farmers and your President, Meurig Raymond has never been behind the fence when he's had the opportunity to advance directly with me the case for British farmers.

Likewise, I met the President of the CLA, Ross Murray, during a recent visit to the Devon County show and I can confidently say that the members and interests of the CLA are in safe hands.

At the outset of my remarks, I reflected on the current political circumstances which are an obvious backdrop to my visit. Whatever about those circumstances (and I'm sure we could discuss them all day), it really is a pleasure to be here today.

I never tire of attending events like these where farmers and food producers and others have the opportunity to showcase their animals and food. As somebody who grew up on a farm and subsequently represented a largely rural constituency in the Irish parliament for 30 years, I appreciate that farming is a difficult occupation with no market certainty.

What events such as this do is provide the opportunity to recreate the link between our urban and rural communities. I'm sorry to say that there is nowadays too much of a disconnect between producers and consumers and far too much misunderstanding as to the origin of food.

As farmers and producers, you are producing food to a consistently high quality that increasingly discerning consumers demand. It is a pity, therefore, that you as producers are, in many cases, not getting an appropriate return for the quality of the food you produce and for the time and cost that it takes to produce that food.

I am constantly being reminded of the shortcomings in the food chain whereby it seems increasingly that all actors, other than the farmer, are getting a fair share.

I keep saying that without the farmer, we don't have the product.

While it is important that consumers have choice, it's equally important that get a fair return for their work.

I have been working to see how the position of the farmer can be strengthened. I have established a Task Force which is looking at the issue and, particularly, at legislative models that exist in the EU.

In that regard, the Groceries' Adjudicator here in the UK is one such model which has generated a lot of interest and is certainly one in which I am interested. Let's see if this is an approach to boosting the farmers' position that can be more widely replicated.

Finally, I want to thank my hosts today – the Directors of the Kent County Agricultural Society – for extending the invitation to be here.

Allow me to particularly thank the person who first approached me about being here – long before either of us knew the date of the referendum, I might add!

That person is Richard Ashworth MEP. Richard is an articulate and persuasive voice in the European Parliament on behalf of British farmers. Richard was pushing a simplification agenda, one to which I am very committed, long before I became Commissioner. He is a highly effective member of the Parliament's Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee and, as with many other UK representatives in the various Institutions, his voice of reason will be missed.

In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, I want to thank all of you who have attended this morning's event, especially NFU President Meurig Raymond and CLA Deputy President Tim Breitmeyer. I know that today is only day one of a three-day marathon, so I wish all of you, the organisers, the exhibitors and all of the many thousands of visitors a very successful Kent County Show and I sincerely hope that not alone the show but that British agriculture goes from strength to strength.

Ends.

