

# Is UK agriculture better off in or out of Europe?

thEUnit Digest



Farmers would be '*reckless and naive*' to think current farm support levels would continue if the UK left the European Union, according to a leading Conservative MEP.

Richard Ashworth was responding to claims made by UKIP MEP Stuart Agnew that farmers would be better outside the EU, during a feisty European elections hustings event in London on Wednesday evening.

Mr Agnew, a Norfolk farmer himself, fought a lone battle on the issue of EU membership, as politicians from four other UK political parties all made the case for staying in Europe, albeit while pursuing reform of its flawed institutions.

Mr Agnew announced himself at the NFU-organised event, which took place at the Farmers Club, by declaring '*the party is over*' as far as UK farming's relationship with the EU is concerned.

While admitting Europe provided a '*bonanza*' for UK farmers in the decade up to 1984, he said the bad has increasingly outweighed the good since.

***"We feel in UKIP we would be better to be outside the EU, particularly for agriculture,"*** he said.

## Regulation

He made repeated reference throughout the evening to how Europe has '*strangled*' British agriculture through regulation, citing the neonicotinoid ban, the inability to grow GM crops

and a raft of legislation imposed on pig and poultry producers.

If you work for the European Commission, he said, your one job is to make rules. *"It is a job for life. The only way to get sacked is if you are a whistle blower."*

While the other candidates for the May 22 European Parliament elections argued that UK farmers needed to be part of the single EU trading block, Mr Agnew said, if it left the union, the UK could forge its own trading relationships, for example, with Japan.

***"You don't have to be in a political union to trade with it. If we were to leave the EU we would still be members of the WTO,"*** he said.

UKIP has pledged to continue the Single Farm Payment at the same level but, realistically, is not going to be in a position to make that decision.

Mr Agnew derided the '*shambles*' of last year's CAP reform. He argued that CAP funding has been falling – its share of the EU budget is now 48 per cent, compared with 80 per cent at one point – and will continue to do so as member states look to contribute less to central EU funds and the union expands east bringing in more net beneficiaries.

*"We are getting a smaller share of a smaller cake,"* he said.

## **Reckless**

He pointed out that, as the second biggest net contributor, the UK would save money by leaving the EU, while other member states would have to cut payments in the absence of the UK contribution.

But Mr Ashworth, a South East MEP and, like Mr Agnew, a member of the EU Parliament's Agriculture Committee, dismissed the suggestion UK farmers would not be harmed by leaving the EU.

He pointed out that they still receive €4.18bn (£3.44bn) a year from the CAP and that this money typically accounts for 50 per cent of a farm's net income.

*"The idea that we could leave the EU and manage without 50 per cent of net farm income is not going to run," he said.*

*"We are not going to be able to pass that onto consumers because retailers would fly around the world and get and buy the food from where they can get it, so that is not going to happen.*

*"You could say the British Government will pay it but it would be reckless and naïve to believe that is going to happen.*

*"Without a shadow of doubt the UK is better off within the CAP, which is not to say agricultural policy doesn't need to change," he said.*

He said leaving the EU would leave UK farmers disadvantaged against farmers still accessing the CAP in 27 other member states and would expose the UK to trading on its own in the global marketplace, where it would face tariffs on 'everything you send for export'.

## **Trading Bloc**

Labour South East candidate James Swindlehurst said the UK needed to be part of the EU trading bloc to compete on a global scale with the likes of China, Russia and the US.

*"China is growing at 7 per cent a year. The only trading bloc big enough to rival it is the EU. In the long-term we have to work in that marketplace," he said.*

*"The last CAP reform didn't do nearly enough to tackle the historic inefficiencies of the CAP but we need to retain a common policy."*

Catherine Bearder, an East of England MEP, stressed that her

party, the Liberal Democrats, was the only one that stood, unequivocally as *'the party of in-Europe'*.

She said that, if the UK left Europe, farmers would still have to comply with all the rules and regulations coming out of Brussels to trade with it but would be powerless to alter those rules. Farming rules would be set by the French and the Germans.

### **Impoverished UK**

*"We would have a very much impoverished UK,"* she said.

This prompted an angry response from Mr Agnew who claimed the UK already had minimal influence over events in Europe, which were increasingly driven by countries in Eurozone. *"Our voice is pathetic,"* he said.

Green Party candidate Caroline Allen, a practising vet, said her party wanted to stay in Europe but push to reform it, including doing more to tackle climate change and transforming the CAP to benefit the environment and smaller farmers.

*"We need to work together in Europe to tackle climate change and the idea. If we leave Europe the CAP money disappears and the idea that we could carry on on our own in global markets is just ridiculous,"* she said.

*This article first appeared in thEUnit Digest.*