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This land is your land – facing change in a rural county

Opening address by Caz Graham

We are truly blessed to live in such a beautiful part of the world, I'm reminded of that every day when I go out to interview farmers and other people involved in rural life around this county; those of us who live and work here drive along roads that other people read about in the travel sections of the Sunday papers for being the most spectacular in the UK, as our means of getting from A to B.

And then when I've done my interviews I head back to my little office at one end of the sitting room in our house in Kendal where it's all too easy to get distracted by views of the hills as I edit my reports to send down to colleagues unfortunate enough to be based in cities down south. Norman Nicholson, a favourite Cumbrian poet of many of us, who knew this landscape better than most, was exaggerating just a little in his book *Greater Lakeland* when he said that in Kendal "the fells come so close they almost hold the traffic up in the street" but non the less, when you live this part of the world, you probably agree it can be a bit too easy to get waylaid by the scenery.

One thing I can't and won't do though, is take any of those views for granted because this landscape and those communities who live and work within it are precious things that we need to take time to understand and nurture to make sure we don't lose them.

For anyone wondering quite why I'm up here talking to you today - and that definitely included me when the people organising today's event got in touch a couple of months ago – I'll give you a little potted background. I grew up on a Cumbrian mixed farm, with beef and dairy cattle and arable crops, in fact, if you perched on the top of the cathedral tower with a pair of binoculars you might even be able to see it because it's only around 3 miles away as the crow flies. My first job, many years ago, was reading the lamb bank and fat-stock prices on Radio Cumbria – but it's what I do in my current job as a reporter for programmes like *Farming Today*, *PM* and others on BBC Radio 4 that's most relevant. I cover a wide range of issues about what happens and what might happen in rural areas, and because the BBC charter requires balanced, impartial reporting, I always hear both – or numerous - sides of whatever story I'm covering.

"This land is your land..." is a very pertinent title for today's discussion about how to approach the changes in policy and attitude we may well see in the coming years. Because whose land is it? Who is this land for? It's a question that's asked on a far more regular basis now than ever before. When Woodie Guthrie wrote that song back in the 1940s in the States it was about how America belonged to its people, not just the property owners, the folks with the deeds to the land.

The rural landscape of Cumbria is very special, many people feel a strong emotional ownership regardless of whose name happens to be written down next to every acre on the national Land Register. Which means that as new policies about how farmers are supported for the work they do in the future take shape - with the idea of 'public money', or subsidies as many call them, for 'public goods' - recognising that there are lots of different voices with very different desires for the countryside will be ever more important.

When you look at the Lake District in particular, but really all of Cumbria, it can sometimes seem like everyone wants their 'bit' of it. And there are multiple opinions about how it should be managed, what it should be used for and how it should be safeguarded for the future. And obviously everyone believes their approach is the right one. That's why occasions like this Discussion Day that gather a broad range of people with widely different backgrounds and areas of interest all under one roof to talk are so important. Meaningful dialogue between all of those who feel ownership and who have a stake in the future of rural life here is essential - because otherwise the arguments around big and really important questions can become polarised, or worse still, personalised.

There have never been more demands on the land. I can look into my work diary any week of the year and there might be several that I could - or should - be out reporting on and not just for farming programmes. They range from the global to the super-local.

- For example: the role of the uplands and mosses as carbon stores, how peat bogs act as a carbon sink in the fight against global warming.
- The role of trees and forests for the same, as well as for the part they can play in helping with flood alleviation, slowing the flow of water so that thousands of people, probably some here today, who live in places like Carlisle and Cockermouth and Kendal - And York!! - don't have to worry quite so much when there's torrential rain.
- Actually, we could talk about trees all day, some people want them covering the fells to let the hills re-wild, they want to ditch the sheep to improve habitats, increase the numbers of birds and the range of flora and fauna that's declined so badly over the decades.
- But then where would that leave the farmers who've worked that land for generations and the small rural communities, the wallers, the contractors, the agricultural suppliers who send their kids to the local school, help with the local show and stop honeypot villages in stunning locations from turning into what are in effect holiday retreats for those who can afford them.
- Should we stick up zip wires to draw in people who might not come and enjoy this landscape without that kind of introduction? Or should we guard the peace and the tranquillity as a refuge from the noise and clamour and stress of modern life, keep the hills as they were when Wordsworth and Coleridge strode around on them?

The experts and the academics - and yes, that is some of you lot! - will talk about 'Landscape functionality', It all sounds very technical, as if you could stick it all on a spreadsheet or plot it on a graph and come up with some definitive answers about what needs to happen - and you could - if there was a consensus about what the countryside is for, but there isn't, it's not a black and white affair. So sometimes when you look at the debate about rural economy and land-use, you find yourself looking at lots of different groups lobbying for very diverse demands that often seem contradictory and, frankly, completely incompatible.

And then once we reduce anything to talking about 'groups' or factions, we're already on track to getting blinkered and distilling real concerns, real lives, really important issues down to stereotypes where there's an 'us' and there's a 'them'.

Well, I interview individuals from all of these groups on a regular basis, and it's my job to get them to really open up about what's important to them and why it matters and let me tell you, there are no stereotypical farmers, there are no stereotypical conservationists or adventure tourism junkies. There are simply people who care deeply about this part of the world and want the best for it.

One of the ways broadcasters like me illustrate our work is by finding the right people to highlight the issue. If you dig down past the jargon and the labels and academic models you get to the personal:

- It's the young farming family, determined to make a go of it because they've grown up eating, drinking, sleeping, breathing hill farming and sheep breeding, it's who they are, it's in their blood, in their DNA and of course they feel passionate about finding a way to preserve that way of farming, that lifestyle.
- But alternatively, it's a conservationist - or skip the label - someone who loves nature and who is devastated when, say, hedges get cut when there's no real reason to, apart from keeping them tidy. To a farmer, in the past that's been good stewardship and general maintenance, gosh my mum used to moan like mad about the hedges on our farm being untidy, just like she would if someone desperately needed a haircut or needed to do their homework - that's how she'd been brought up, hedges should be tidy!. But from a conservation point of view a neat hedge that's topped to make it look respectable every couple of years is more than likely to be a sterile hedge, a poor habitat, few winter berries for birds to feed on, home for fewer species like moths and beetles and small mammals, there'll be fewer native wild flowers, and I meet many people who are genuinely dismayed and upset about habitat decline and the huge drop we've seen in things like bird numbers over the decades and the part farming has played in that.

It's farming that may see the biggest and most significant changes over the next ten years or so. UK farming after Brexit is going to be different, there's no doubt about that, but no-one's going to know quite what it'll look like until there's some certainty on trade agreements, tariffs and what shape future agriculture and environment policies take.

The message from Michael Gove, the Secretary of State at DEFRA, the Dept. for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs, is pretty clear: post Brexit the support payments – some call them subsidies - farmers have received from the EU based on the amount of land they farm will be replaced with, and I quote “a new system of public money for public goods”. That’s what he told delegates at this year’s Oxford Farming Conference a couple of months ago and he elaborated by adding that “The principal public good we will invest in is, of course, environmental enhancement”. So, things like increasing bio-diversity, flood alleviation, improving water quality and improving public access. Many people – and not just farmers - argue that producing high quality, ethically farmed, affordable food is the most important ‘public good’ – and it’s crucial to ensure farmers can continue to do that. But the appetite for subsidising farmers simply for ‘farming’, isn’t there. It probably hasn’t been since the 1950s and early 60’s and the end of rationing.

Those with a long memory will remember headlines about ‘feather bedded farmers’ in the late 60s when the general public and other industries asked why agriculture should be prioritised. The National Farmers Union marched through the streets of London to 10 Downing Street, arguing its case and asking for more money. It didn’t get a huge amount of sympathy then and it would get even less today.

The farming industry has to be realistic, support for agriculture is way down the public and political pecking order. And that’s why I think Michael Gove’s Green Brexit is actually quite clever because it paves the way for a system that supports farmers while highlighting what they do for the environment and the landscape. Now, I’m sure you’ll all have noticed that DEFRA’s just published its Future of Agriculture consultation paper (although you might not know that it’s called Health and Harmony which sounds alarmingly like an advert for a yoga retreat or hair conditioner). If you fancy speed-reading through all 64 pages of it and I know you will, you’ll see it says that new environmental land management schemes will be underpinned by the idea of what’s called ‘natural capital’ which is an idea that’s been knocking around for a few years now. It’s not the simplest of concepts to pin down but basically ‘natural capital’ is about recognising that there’s an economic value to things like: clean air, clean water, flood alleviation and maintaining beautiful landscapes that we all enjoy and love. These things don’t come for free. Farmers and land owners and managers have looked after ‘natural capital’ as a kind of by-product of what they do until now – in future it’s going to be central to everything they do if they want to be supported by the tax payer, which is going to be a loud ‘yes’ from anyone farming in the uplands where farm payments make up a large percentage of their income and trade with Europe which is where nearly 40% of sheep meat ends up are looking uncertain.

That’s going to require a change in mind-set, but if it can be made to work, if it’s a constructive consultation that results in a system which has something to offer farmers, conservationists and serves that ‘public good’, it could be, dare I say it, a positive development for everyone. It’s not often you get a chance like this, to take a blank page and rethink what we want out of a policy.

But to make it work, everyone's got to be on that same page. Everyone has to take the plunge a bit a little more open-minded. By that I mean that the conservationists or walkers who find farmers easy game to compartmentalise and criticise, and vice versa, the farmers who are happy to tar all walkers with the same brush and assume they'll leave gates open and drop rubbish; and who reckon some environmental bodies, academics and charities are part of a rather aloof high-minded industry that works to keep itself in business without properly understanding the workings of the countryside or the practicalities of farming. Well, these guys need to roll up their sleeves and make a commitment to try and get on with each other. We need to be smarter at finding a common ground, at looking for those areas where there is agreement and we need to work at how to grow and develop those commonalities and how to shrink the differences.

There's already lots of positive work to build on - I recently made a programme about a very interesting pilot scheme that's being run by the Yorkshire Dales National Park and Natural England to see whether 'payments by results' can work as a good way of achieving environmental improvement. It means farmers really understand what 'end' result they're after, so in this case better habitats for breeding birds and more species of native flowers and grasses in hay meadows. Instead of the current top-down approach where farmers are told what they can and can't do and when they can or can't do it, they use their own knowledge and experience of their own land to come up with those results. And because they have a vested interest in them, i.e. better payments for more birds or flowers, it's a system that will hopefully get better results than just making farmers stick to standardised rules imposed from above, that may or may not work increase the number of birds, but which will get you a cheque in the bank regardless. Everyone seemed positive about how it was working and I noticed with interest that it's down as a case study in the DEFRA consultation paper.

Of course, rural economies and communities can't thrive on wild flowers and breeding birds. There's a lot of concern about what Michael Gove will actually deliver and even more about the viability of farming in an uncertain trading system out of the single market after Brexit.

Some commentators have suggested UK farmers should grow more food for a UK market - but there aren't many Cumbrian farmers going to be planting up peaches and aubergines to fill the gap in the market when the price of imported food goes up, though we did have one or two listeners who emailed in very excited when I did an April Fool's Day story for Farming Today a couple of years ago about how Richard Park at Low Sizergh farm near Kendal had diversified his dairy farm into growing vanilla pods to help reduce the food miles for Lake District ice cream makers.

I don't want to end on a negative note because this is an exciting time. There's a lot of energy and drive to make Brexit - and whatever it brings - work for farming and the countryside; there was a real buzz about it at both the Oxford Farming Conference this year and the recent NFU Conference.

Everywhere I report from across rural Cumbria I meet people who are passionate about this landscape and usually strongly committed to the wellbeing of those who live and work in it. I meet people who care deeply about what happens here, who are invariably trying their hardest and doing their best for the land.

Not everyone agrees on what that 'best' thing is. It's not easy coming up with ideas, initiatives, policies that suit everyone. But our best bet for securing the most positive future for rural Cumbria is to build even better channels of communication, to broaden the dialogue and push for more cooperation and more collaboration,