

# **Oxford Farming Conference Speech by Rt Hon Hilary Benn 5 January 2010**

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**Thank you, Heather. Good morning ladies and gentlemen. It's good to be here. Indeed, there's nothing like coming through the door marked 'examination halls' for getting a Secretary of State's year off to a lively start.**

**At my first Oxford conference two years ago, after a particularly difficult year for farming, I talked about the environmental and economic challenges that we faced.**

**The first case of Bluetongue had arrived on our shores in September 2007.**

**The year that followed showed exactly what can happen when potential threats to the world's food production and security become real.**

**Drought, poor harvests and high oil prices pushed up the cost of grain, and some cities saw riots as the cost of a day's food also rose sharply.**

**Last year we saw rising sea levels take yet more land from Bangladeshi farmers while rising temperatures in North-West Siberia reduced the pasture available to the reindeer herds.**

**Right across the globe, the future we started to glimpse two years ago is now well and truly upon us.**

**Now it's only in the last few decades that we have felt able to take food supply for granted, but the truth is now apparent.**

**We cannot take it for granted any more.**

**Food security is as important to this country's future wellbeing – and that of the world's - as energy security. Securing both must be our priority.**

**Sixty years ago, at the end of the second world war, Attlee's Government published the UK's first Food Strategy. Its aim was to ensure the nation's food security in the years ahead.**

**Today, I am publishing the Government's new Food Strategy - Food 2030. Why? Because we need once again as a nation to see why food production matters.**

**Food shapes our landscape. We spend £173 billion a year on food and drink. It provides a livelihood for over 3 and a half million people. And it is of course about sustaining life itself.**

**Food 2030 is a national strategy, but it recognises that we live in a global marketplace. And the UK needs to stay competitive in that market which is already challenging, and is going to get tougher.**

**The Strategy sets out what we have to do to secure our food for 2030 and beyond, and how each of us must play our part in helping to make this happen.**

**It is a big challenge, yes, but it is also a big opportunity for farming.**

**We need to do three things.**

**First, we need to produce more food.**

**Second, we need to do it sustainably.**

**And third we need to make sure that the food we eat safeguards our health.**

**How are we going to do it?**

**By helping consumers to be better informed and able to buy healthy food from sustainable sources with the minimum of waste.**

**By making sure that every part of the supply chain is resilient, competitive and has the skills that match the challenge. That's why, for example, I set up the Fruit and Veg taskforce because having said at this conference that I want British farming to**

**produce as much food as possible I can't see why we can't produce more of it ourselves.**

**By using science and technological advance to assist us.**

**By having the strength to conserve what's good and the courage to change what isn't.**

**By talking up farming and food, not running it down, and by working together to celebrate what it does and everything that it means.**

**Now, all this may seem daunting, but it's nothing that we haven't done before in our history.**

**Since Attlee's plan, our talent for trade has built a food supply that offers almost unlimited diversity and choice.**

**In sixty short years we have gone from tinned pike (known called snoek) and powdered eggs to a wealth of home-grown meat and fish, cheese, salads, fruit and vegetables, including forty name protected food products, from Scotch Beef to the latest - Cornish sardines.**

**It's a great achievement, and one of which farmers, food producers and retailers can justifiably be proud. And none of us want to go back.**



**But we also know that the consequences of the way we produce and consume much of our food are unsustainable. To our planet and to ourselves.**

**Ours is a world where a billion people go to bed hungry each night because they are too poor to have enough to eat, while the same number of people in rich countries are overweight or obese because they eat too much.**

**A world where 3 billion people live on less than £1.30 a day while British households throw out nearly £33 million worth of food a day.**

**A world where a lot of food production depends on oil and water to such an extent that we will be very**

**vulnerable when they become either too expensive or too scarce.**

**Is all this sustainable? No, it isn't.**

**Is it just? Of course it isn't.**

**Is it going to be helped by governments abdicating responsibility or by leaving it just to the market to sort out? Clearly not.**

**We know some things have to change.**

**I think we know that we are at one of those moments in our history where the future of our**

**economy, our environment, our society will be shaped by the choices we make now.**

**And, we should have confidence that provided we make the right choices, we can do it.**

**Now why do I say that?**

**Because it is the very same skill, ingenuity, passion, and sheer proud commitment that have given us this plenty, which will provide us with what we need in the years to come.**

**But, as you know better than anyone else, farmers can't make these choices on their own. The supply chain is a circle and consumers are the beginning**

**and the end of it. The choices they make determine yours.**

**A decade ago, only 16% of eggs produced in Britain were free range. It's more than doubled to just under 40%. Waitrose, M & S and the Co-op now sell only free range or organic eggs. And with the UK 80% self-sufficient here, this is a great example of how our farmers have responded to what consumers want, to the benefit of both.**

**Or take Fairtrade. In 1994 it was launched with just three products. Now, 15 years later, there are over 4,500 Fairtrade products on our supermarket**

**shelves. A direct response by consumers wanting to make sure that farmers in developing countries get a fair price for what they produce.**

**And in case that sounds familiar, we will be publishing our response to the Competition Commission's important report shortly.**

**Food 2030 makes the point that consumers' choices do have an effect.**

**Choosing healthy and sustainable food, for example. Any national Food Strategy cannot just be about how we produce our food. It must also be about the impact of what we eat on our health.**

**And here we have made progress, with better food labelling and the Change 4 Life campaign which has led over 400,000 families to sign up.**

**Government has to do its bit, but so does everyone else.**

**Manufacturers have already made significant changes. Levels of saturated fat and salt and sugar are dropping across a growing range of products.**

**But those who make and sell food are not their customers' keeper. As individuals, as parents, as families we must make choices for ourselves and we need the information to help us do so.**

**We do want better and more accurate nutritional labelling.**

**We do want to know about where our food was produced. Beef is already labelled by country of origin. So is poultry. Lamb is pretty well labelled. On pork, the Pig Meat taskforce we set up has agreed a code of practice on labelling. I expect all our retailers to sign up to it when it's published.**

**One of the things the code will do is to deal with the misleading nonsense of Wiltshire cured ham being made from imported pork without telling the consumer.**

**And in Europe we are negotiating on the new EU Labelling Regulation.**

**We want this to ensure that meat can only be labelled as 'British' if the animal was born, reared and slaughtered in the UK, and that products processed here and labelled as 'British' will also have to show – if the main ingredients are imported - where they came from.**

**We are also increasingly interested in both the sustainability of the fish and the meat we buy and the conditions in which it was reared. And by the**



way we are not backing down on banning battery cages by 2012.

We also increasingly realise that we need to buy with our stomachs rather than our eyes so that we can reduce the £480 that the average UK family spends each year on food - much of it grown in Britain - that simply ends up in the bin.

We increasingly understand that our planet cannot just become landfill through which rising levels of methane seep into the atmosphere. We must deal with the waste involved in food production and consumption.

**Food 2030 describes how we can do things differently.**

**Last year FareShare re-distributed enough leftover food to help feed 29,000 people a day through a network of 600 local charities, saving thousands of tonnes of carbon in the process.**

**A growing number of retailers now sell apparently less than beautiful fruit and vegetables, which consumers are snapping up because it's how they taste that really matters.**

**The 2008 Milk Road Map, produced under the chairmanship of Dairy UK at our suggestion, shows how collaboration in the supply chain is**

**already making real changes to the environmental performance of the sector – using less water and using more recycled plastic in milk bottles.**

**The willingness of farmers and others to explore and embrace what science has to offer, with the results of research an increasing encouragement to do so.**

**Our strawberry industry is worth nearly £200 million a year, and growing. Defra co-funded field trials at East Malling of a new irrigation system that responds to water loss from individual strawberry plants.**

**Do you know what the result was? Much less water is needed, yields hold and the strawberries taste just as good. One example of how we can be profitable and sustainable today.**

**You asked me for more investment in research and development. I've listened. Last October a new partnership was announced by the Technology Strategy Board, Defra and the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council. The TSB will put £50 million into food and agriculture research over the next 5 years, alongside funding from Defra and the BBSRC.**

**One of the reasons we're doing this is because we are less clear about the difference climate change**

**will make to our land in 20 or 30 years time. So prioritising the protection of our soil, our water, our plants and our biodiversity is something that makes sense today.**

**That's why the launch of the Campaign for the Farmed Environment in November was such an important moment.**

**Those who work the land and those who care for its flora and fauna – the same people by the way - came together and said: “We have a responsibility for the future. We are backing this because it is the right thing to do.”**

**And I simply want to say thanks to everyone who has committed to make the Campaign a success, in particular the NFU; Peter and the CLA; William for your support in getting it up and running.**

**The spirit of the Campaign is, I think, what we will need to make Food 2030 happen.**

**It can't all be done by passing legislation, although there's a place for that where it makes sense, and just because some people don't like it doesn't make it wrong.**

**It is about the long term.**

**It is about harnessing the will, the determination, the enthusiasm of farmers, the food industry, Government, and wildlife, countryside and consumer organisations to show what we can achieve when we put our minds to it.**

**It is about showing - for example through beacon farms – that there doesn't have to be a competition between productivity and environmental stewardship; they can co-exist for the benefit of both.**

**It is about making full use of good ideas and what research can teach us, as the need to do so becomes more urgent.**

**Do you know, the combined effect of a changing climate and a global population that will grow, as you said Heather, to 9 billion in the next forty years defines why food production and environmental sustainability are interdependent and indivisible.**

**We must again adapt as humankind to survive and prosper.**

**What happened at Copenhagen just before Christmas wasn't the end of what we're trying to achieve; it was only the start and we need to get on with it.**

**Food production and consumption account for almost a third of Europe's greenhouse gas**



**emissions - a level that must come down if we are to meet our targets.**

**To help British farmers reduce the carbon that comes from using energy, two days after the Copenhagen summit ended I announced, in conjunction with the NFU and the Carbon Trust, that from next month farmers can apply for interest-free loans to invest in saving energy.**

**They can be used for things like grain dryers, or thermal screens or milk cooling systems. Loan of between £3,000 and £20,000 will be available and farmers will have 4 years in which to repay them.**

**The Voluntary Action Plan - in which we are working with the industry in England to show how agriculture can reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 3 million tonnes a year by 2020 – is another example of how farming can lead the way.**

**Reducing emissions will be about learning from the best farmers and the best science; sampling soil nitrogen before applying the fertiliser that's needed, using integrated pest management, or simply by planting trees to soak up carbon.**

**It is also about investing in the skills that the farmers of the future will need.**

**Farming should be the progressive industry of the future, with a Common Agricultural Policy - supporting productive farming - to match.**

**Those who work in it need greater public recognition and thanks. So do those who support it.**

**But we also need a new culture of professionalism, to ensure that we have a new generation of skilled farmers who can pick up where those of today leave off.**

**The new AgriSkills Plan 'Towards a New Professionalism' which came out of the roundtable I held last year and is currently under consultation, is a profoundly important piece of work. I congratulate Richard Longthorp, the NFU, Lantra, the AHDB, LANDEX and everyone else involved in its creation. We have backed this development through funding for Fresh Start, the 14-19 diploma, and through the RDPE which in total is roughly double the size of its predecessor.**

**This is another example of taking collective responsibility for the future of our food, rather than seeing it as somebody else's.**

**Conference, Food 2030 is about the chance we have to do all these things. It is part of the greener society that we have to build in the next 20 years.**

**As to those years ahead - like the years gone by - some will be good and some will be tough.**

**Your job as growers and producers of Britain's food is to seize the opportunity before you, and show what you can do using all the ingenuity and tenacity that is inherent in farming, and fishing and food.**

**My job is to support you.**

**Our job – as a society – is to value food for what it is really worth.**

**Everything.**

**The future is here now. What we do will shape it.  
This is a great opportunity for British farming, and  
it is up to us to take it.**

**Thank you.**

**2,633 words**