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## "A farmer and a woman" - The new Fellow securing food for the nation

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The latest cohort of new Fellows elected to the Institution was welcomed to One Birdcage Walk this month. Among the distinguished and high achieving engineers meeting together for the first time was new Fellow Christine Tacon, whose considerable engineering skills and knowledge are helping to ensure that UK agriculture is sustainable and ethical and, in the context of the global population challenge, is helping to deliver food and water security now and in the future.

Christine Tacon is an embodiment of the adage that a contemporary mechanical engineer is probably not what you think. The new Fellow has been Managing Director of the Co-operative Farms for the past decade, and is clear that introducing engineering principles and fostering collaboration with agencies from outside the farming world has revolutionised the business's productivity and its self-perception with regard to long term social, environmental and economic sustainability.



She said: "When I joined the business 11 years ago, it was losing money. Although we were attracting the very best people, they were all farmers and tended to focus on competing with the farm next door, rather than on the market. I realised that we could benefit from talking to external opinion formers and the government and EU, who pay our subsidies. Within a year, I was invited onto the DEFRA sponsored Implementation Group of the Sustainable Farming and Food Strategy, and through this connection met EU Commissioners to gain their perspective. Gaining this external view helped me to develop and lead a strategy on food production which meant the business moved towards producing food for the market, grown to order, rather than speculatively."

"It was also important to start caring for the environment, as well as producing food, so we introduced a strategy to secure water sources, building new reservoirs, cleansing and recycling water in packhouses and sinking new bore holes; to protect the environment through signing up to environmental schemes and doing more by having our own projects to protect endangered species; to ensure food security by increasing production of crops we can grow competitively in the UK; and educate children about food production – all vital if, as a nation, we are to ensure our ever growing population can continue to be fed, given the challenges we face due to climate change."

Christine offered a real insight into how her engineering skills and expertise helped her to bring about this revolutionary approach. She said: "At face value, one might expect an engineer to be involved in agriculture only to design a pump to bring water from a reservoir. However, they have more to offer at a strategic level: using their education and analytical skills to challenge the irrigation methods used including adopting a technology that measured the moisture in the soil where the plant needed it, rather than the rainfall; sometimes we are irrigating whilst it is raining! Also, when the Co-operative Farms were looking to come out of dairy production, I did a regression model based on previous years' milk patterns and showed that the nation would not go over its quota, meaning that quota prices were too high, so we sold ours and made £5m more than if we had sold a year later."

The decision that Christine made to exit dairy farming and expand into fresh produce and packing, together with bringing an FMCG approach to the farming sector, ensured that she transformed the Co-operative Group's farming business from a £6m loss, £40m turnover in 2000 to £6m profit and £65m turnover. Her engineering analytical skills also enabled her to effect cultural change and greater efficiency within the business with initiatives based upon corporate co-operation, such as sharing combine harvesters, moving them north once no longer needed in the south, which created a massive reduction in fixed assets.

Christine's influence has been felt even more widely within the farming industry. She implemented Habitat Heroes – an industry leading environmental management system and species protection project. She networked with landowners, government, the BBC, the EU, industry leaders and grower groups, leading to demonstrable change in strategy and communication on Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform implementation and cattle movement process to contain TB. She chairs the BBC's Rural Affairs Advisory Committee, which advises all BBC food and farming programmes including Countryfile, which is now the broadcaster's most watched factual programme.

She has been at the vanguard of high profile education projects, initiating the multi-award winning 'From Farm to Fork' schools education project: over 60k primary school children have spent an educationally structured day on a farm to date. She also chaired the 2011 Oxford Farming Conference on a programme which she put together with her fellow directors, all volunteers. The speakers included Professor Aubrey Manning, talking about the impact of a population of 9bn. A debate in the Oxford Union with Jonathon Porritt of the Optimum Population Trust against Sir Paul Judge - the past chair of Food from Britain – considered whether unrestrained population control and food security are incompatible. On the second day of the conference there was a technological session with Professor John Boyer talking on water scarcity and its solutions and two presentations from scientists on the technological solutions on increasing productivity in plants and livestock. The conference was attended by the Secretary of State, Minister of Agriculture, other MPs and MEPs and the European Commissioner, 500 delegates and about 50 members of the press, as well as countless students and interested members of the public who increased their knowledge of the key issues by viewing the conference online.

Having achieved so much for the Co-operative Group, and having previously enjoyed a successful career working for such companies as Mars, Anchor Foods UK, Redland plc and Vodafone, did Christine feel it was the natural time for her to become a Fellow of the Institution? She smiled, and said: "Er, not exactly; I only really found out that I was eligible for Fellowship when I received a letter from the Institution! I had been maintaining my membership, but it felt a little bit dodgy because I was not in what you might call mainstream engineering."

"I became a Chartered Engineer within 3 ½ years of leaving university – I read Manufacturing Engineering at Cambridge. Gaining Chartership was a very proud moment of my life and a real highlight to be accepted as a Member of the Institution. I had never considered being a Fellow. Then I received the letter, and almost at the same time, I heard Dr Tim Fox on the BBC Radio 4 Today programme being interviewed by John Humphrys about the Institution's views on food security. I thought to myself, 'Well, I work in the farming business, and I have campaigned with the UK government on food production and water security.' Hearing that interview made me realise that my perception about the Institution not really being interested in those people working outside mainstream engineering, was not accurate, so I decided that this could be a good time to become a Fellow of the Institution."

In January, Christine will be embarking upon a new direction when she steps down as Managing Director of the Co-operative Farms. With her passion for food security, the impact of food on diet and climate change, she is looking to ensure her expertise can continue to bear fruit: she wants to build a portfolio of small and big business, become a good board member in a non-executive capacity; advise Government committees and offer real value to a not for profit charitable or educational organization. She has no doubt that Fellowship of the Institution will offer her real benefit as she changes career. She said: "I'm proud to be a Fellow of the Institution. I'm going to put this on my business card, and who knows – I might well be useful to an engineering organization supplying the food process industry."

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