

CARR'S CORNER

Surprised by our similar lines of thought

A lot of commonsense from Co-operative Farms managing director Christine Tacon

“ Having agreed to speak to a farming society in Scotland, I was slightly concerned that I was to share a platform with Christine Tacon, the managing director of Co-operative Farms – Britain’s largest arable farm. Ms Tacon has a reputation both as an excellent speaker and a successful farmer and I started to worry that my 20 minutes of parochial pearls of wisdom might look a bit pedestrian alongside a talk from this agricultural powerhouse.

During the 11 years that Ms Tacon has run Co-op Farms, she has turned it around from a £6m loss into a £4m profit. Her impressive CV includes a Cambridge degree, a successful spell in marketing and recent prestigious roles such as the chairing of the 2011 Oxford Farming Conference.

How would I fare once



the Kelso Agricultural Discussion Society got to compare their two speakers?

Inevitably, Ms Tacon’s Power-Point presentation did put my effort in the shade but, that said, I never felt uncomfortable. Indeed, after we’d both made our presentations and the meeting was thrown open to questions from the floor, I felt a growing sense that she and I thought along surprising similar lines given the vast gulf between the size and complexity of the farming enterprises that we run.

The first thing that struck me was Ms Tacon’s startling declaration that a vital part of turning around the Co-op’s arable business had been her decision to halve the size of the farm from 40,000 to 20,000ha. The conventional wisdom, of course, is that arable farms have

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to expand because only by spreading overheads over an ever-larger hectareage can a farm hope to have a bright future. If that means bidding fancy rents for tenanted land or paying top dollar to buy land then so be it. I’ve never believed in this approach so it’s nice to learn that Britain’s biggest arable farmer has revolutionised the prospects for her own business by focusing on the quality rather than the scale of production.

A later question from the floor revealed that Ms Tacon takes an interest in a long-standing obsession of mine – farm subsidies. I’ve always maintained that the

subsidy tail must sometimes be allowed to wag the farming dog, and Ms Tacon agrees.

She told us that she had considered a beef enterprise on one of the Co-op farm units, but as soon as she understood what damage cross-compliance penalties might do to the Co-op’s £3.5m single farm payment she scrapped the idea. Given that cattle record keeping has proved to be a notoriously soft target for DEFRA cross-compliance inspectors, who would question her decision?

Ms Tacon has announced that she is to resign from the Co-op at the end of this month to take up “other challenges”, including a position on the government’s Strategic Regulatory Panel to advise and challenge DEFRA on “regulatory reform”. If she can bring her down-to-earth commonsense thinking to bear on DEFRA then the Co-op’s loss will surely be every farmer and taxpayer’s gain.

Stephen Carr farms 566ha on the South Downs, near Eastbourne, East Sussex

Podium Guy Gagen

The UK’s grain production problem

It’s time to engage with researchers again to find a solution

“ Across the then EC, cereal production came to be seen as a serious problem for governments in the last century. And it continued in the minds of many of the public and of policy makers to this day. From the late 1980s, the range of policy tools such as capital grants, EU market management, production subsidies and intensive effort in applied agricultural research started to look a bit out of step.

Landscape and biodiversity ought to have benefitted, as surely one of the simplest routes to reducing production and helping limit agriculture’s impact on nature seemed to be to allow some land to become unkept and hope that by not

producing crops on it less pressure would be put on water, soil and air, and wildlife-friendly habitat would appear.

Meanwhile, researchers turned towards more fundamental research. Reward turned away from efforts to identify, explain and help solve the problems farmers had in producing crops. Priorities had changed to match the political and economic imperatives of keeping the UK at the forefront of new scientific discovery and not encouraging more oversupply of agricultural commodities. Government policy reacted to help overcome the problem of overproduction, and to help stem the flow of too much output from agriculture.

As a result, agricultural research institutes were reduced over time from 17 to the three we have today. Extension services were privatised along with most demonstration farms and responsibility for funding research gradually shifted to those with priorities much less linked to farming.

Today, production is seen as a problem again as we face the challenge of strongly growing demand and slowly increasing supply. We also understand much better the dangers of allowing the environment to be spoiled through a headlong rush to agricultural production.

In turn, addressing the problems arable farmers have, such as dealing with fertiliser efficiency or pest competition, are now being

seen as necessary right through to government.

Right now we are on the cusp of astonishing advances in biology as our best fundamental research has discovered how to map plant genomics cheaply, analyse masses of management data from precision farming technology and new ways of imaging soil:plant interactions for growing plants to name a few. Agriculture is getting attention for the right reasons, and it’s time to engage with researchers again as the opportunity for science in coming up with solutions to farmers’ problems probably looks much more exciting than it ever has.

Guy Gagen is NFU chief arable adviser

