



smith's soapbox

by Guy Smith

hand, when it comes to trade deals or support schemes, we want politicians to work hard for agriculture with an effective grasp of farming issues.

In my six years as an NFU office holder, I got to meet quite a few MPs and ministers. On the whole I found them a good-natured bunch given the peculiarity of the Westminster bubble they operated in. Neil Parish would be a good example. Generally he was a genuine supporter of the farming community that he had his roots in. He was particularly effective as chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs committee when it came to holding Defra and its various agencies to account. I particularly remember him effectively savaging the CEO of the RPA over their poor performance.

So in this respect his sudden and complete withdrawal from politics is not good news for farmers.

However the circumstance around his resignation is a reminder that Westminster is a rarified place and the people in it can be prone to some very poor judgement that leads to ill-advised behaviour. I do have some sympathy for Neil Parish, in that he won't be remembered for all his hard work on behalf of farmers but rather he will be remembered as the MP who watched porn on his phone in the House of Commons and, when caught, quite ridiculously the best excuse he could think of was that he thought he was searching for pictures of tractors and combine harvesters. To really put the cherry on the comedy cake, he did it more than once.

Another politician I came across several times was Liz Truss. Unsurprisingly, she was a wholly different character to Neil Parish. And I'll humbly apologise immediately for my shameless name dropping. Curiously, over the years I met her in a number of very different ministerial roles. Ten years ago I was involved in putting together an education pack about agriculture and, as secretary of state for education, she was good enough to help launch the initiative at a primary school in her Norfolk constituency.

Later, as Defra Secretary I found her very understanding when we were lobbying hard to make sure glyphosate didn't get a ban. After that I met her as justice secretary to discuss the NFU's concerns that crimes, such as fly-tipping and hare coursing, didn't carry severe enough penalties given the disruption they caused in the countryside. I was impressed how she seemed to take our arguments seriously. Fly-tipping and hare coursing do now have more severe penalties but still not nearly severe enough.

When in 2018, Liz Truss was

Guy Smith grows 500ha of combinable crops on the north east Essex coast, namely St. Osyth Marsh — officially the driest spot in the British Isles. Despite spurious claims from others that their farms are actually drier, he points out that his farm is in the Guinness Book of Records, whereas others aren't. End of.

@essexpeasant

chief secretary to the Treasury, I was invited in to discuss the forthcoming budget. As I quickly found out, she is not a tax and spend politician. Finally when I met her as trade minister in 2019, I suspected her free trade approach would be painfully double-edged when it came to the interests of farming.

On the one hand, it was hard work to make the case to her for protecting UK agriculture from cheaper imports, even when a key reason they were cheaper was because they were produced with lighter regulation than British farmers endured. On the other hand, she was genuinely enthusiastic about improving export opportunities for our agricultural goods. The fundamental problem remained that the UK imports a good deal more farm produce than it exports.

So how will farmers fare with Liz Truss as Prime Minister? My experience of dealings with her is, that if we get our lobbying right, she has enough understanding of farming for it to be a positive relationship. As a politician she instinctively likes small government just like farmers do. Her challenge will be that the times we live in may well demand some very big government indeed.

Footnote: the views in this are solely the opinion of the writer and do not constitute an endorsement by CPM for any political party or politician. Ed.

Government - both big and small

Farmers have always had a rather fractious and contradictory relationship with politicians. Instinctively, we tend to prefer small government without too much costly regulation hindering the challenge of running farm businesses. In a way, the less we have to do with government the happier we are. On the other

WELVENT

CROP STORAGE SPECIALISTS

Grain Storage
Timber Tunnels
Inverters
Controls
Louvres



Timber Floors
Steel Tunnels
Heaters
Fans



WELVENT LTD
Whisby Way, Whisby Road
Lincoln LN6 3LQ

T 01522 693008
F 01522 500429
E enquiries@welvent.com

www.welvent.com