

I was the MP for part of rural Somerset until I lost last year. I'm proud to be here with you all today, standing up for British farmers and farming. And I thank Farmers For Action for inviting me to speak.

I'm the partner of a Somerset farmer, whose business is beef and cider apples.

He's not here today because he's at home, farming.

Today is about all sorts of farming. We're all feeling the squeeze - whether milk or meat farmers, with prices low and the scourge of tb all around us.

I'd like to disagree with those who want the UK to leave the EU.

The EU is not perfect, but you have to be in it to change things.

The EU supports what I call 'afternoon farmers'. All across Europe, there are men and women who have jobs: they're teachers, shop-keepers, public servants - but every day, after work they come home and work their few acres of land and tend their half-dozen or dozen cattle, sheep and goats.

They describe themselves as farmers. The EU's system of subsidies supports them; and it supports us whilst we're in Europe.

The beauty of the EU is that this Government (and any future Government) can't divert our subsidy. It comes through the UK's Rural Payments Agency, but it's European money and the Government can't meddle with those funds.

As Jim Lukins, head of a family of farmers in Axbridge near us in Somerset, said to me yesterday - and I quote him now "God help us all if, as it was when I started farming all those years ago, we come out of Europe and end up dependent on Defra Ministers going to the Chancellor cap in hand each year for help and support."

The EU protects us all from Governments that may not have any understanding, or indeed sympathy, for farming.

British farming has a bright future. We have the highest standards of animal welfare, food safety standards and we provide world class care for the environment and our landscape.

Our Government could do a lot to help the farmers:

It could encourage innovation and investment in our industry, particularly investing in finding an accurate test for identifying tb. It could stop gold-plating legislation from Europe.

It could introduce legislation insisting on sourcing at home first - the food provided by our public services - in schools, hospitals, the military, prisons - putting British farmers first each time.

It could bring back free school milk - local milk for local children.

And it could make sure that farmers are treated fairly - given a fair price for what they produce.

I believe, as a small 'l' liberal, that Government must and should intervene in the markets - on the basis that farming people, our producers - are coming to harm at the hands of bullies.

That means giving more powers to the Supermarket Ombudsman and applying real pressure to make sure that if retailers want to put farm produce on their shelves as a 'loss leader', which they're perfectly entitled to do, it isn't the farmers who have to carry the burden of the supermarkets' marketing push - the food processors, distributors and retailers take the hit.

Everyone needs to know and understand that it's the farmers who created and caretake our landscape. Areas like mine, Somerset & the West Country, are dependent on farming and tourism - there are 34,000 jobs which rely on tourism in Somerset alone. When visitors come down the M5 into this wonderful county, they expect to see black and white cattle dotted across our rolling green pastures. Take away support for our farmers, and that'll go. And tourism will suffer too.

It's the farmers who feed us - we can supply 80% of what the UK needs already - there's capacity for expansion in this business. It shouldn't have to suffer shoddy practices from business bullies and we need Mr Cameron to hear our message today:

"No farming - No food!" What a catastrophe that'd be for our countryside.

All we want is fair trade, fair treatment and fair play, Mr Cameron. Is that really too much to ask?