SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Thank you for accepting the appointment of Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural affairs. You will be taking this job on at an exciting moment. There is growing appetite from the public, particularly young people, and business to take action on climate change. You are particularly well equipped to help harness this energy and ensure the national consensus for action is turned into concrete measures that will have real impact.

I am writing to set out the challenges ahead for Government and in particular for your Department.

As a Government the key overarching challenges are for us to build on our unprecedented record of economic achievement ensuring our country can compete and win in the global knowledge economy, to take key decisions in the coming period to ensure the long term security and prosperity of our country and its people, to sustain the momentum of public service modernisation showing how investment and the programme of reform is delivering real improvements for ordinary hard-working families, and to underline the Government’s commitment to justice at home and abroad and to ensure we safeguard our planet for our children.
Given this context, I am therefore asking all Secretaries of State to identify the key challenges for their Departments and how they propose to deliver against these.

For DEFRA my priorities are as follows.

Climate change is the greatest long-term threat facing the world today. This Government has displayed leadership at home and internationally, and has a track record of action not just words. But we still need to do more. The problem is becoming more urgent. To tackle climate change, we now need to begin to agree a framework for after 2012 that includes a long-term goal that will stabilise the climate at a safe level and that involves the US, India and China. To drive the technological change that will reduce emissions, we need robust, long-term carbon markets – including an extended EU emissions trading scheme – backed by stronger targets.

Domestically, we are already on course to reduce our emissions by double our Kyoto target: you will need to ensure we make progress towards our 2010 and 2050 domestic targets to reduce CO$_2$, both of which are challenging. I would like you to work closely with other Departments to deliver our shared goal of an energy review that delivers an ambitious programme of action to reduce emissions. People also want to know how they can make small changes to their own lives that make a real difference to global warming and the environment. I want you to develop ideas that will help individuals do that.
I know domestic and international climate change policy is an important priority for several Departments and delivery of our environmental objectives requires DEFRA to work closely with them. We need to look at improving the institutional arrangements. I would like you to explore setting up an Office for Climate Change, to develop climate change policy and strategy, working across Government. The Office would act as a shared resource for key Government Departments. I believe this sort of innovation would provide the basis for even more progress and focus within Whitehall.

Secondly, renewing and developing our long-term thinking on food and farming will be key, to ensure a thriving British farming sector which makes a positive contribution to the UK economy and countryside and meets our environmental and consumer objectives. You will need to ensure that farmers receive their single payment as soon as possible, and that we improve our capacity to deliver payments on time in future years. You will need to work in partnership with domestic and international stakeholders to further reform the Common Agricultural Policy so that it meets the challenges facing EU agriculture today and our commitments to global trade and poverty reduction.

A commitment to environmental protection was in the first Labour manifesto, and this Government has a proud record in improving the quality of local streets and neighbourhoods; delivering cleaner air, beaches and water; and lifting millions of households out of fuel poverty. You should continue to take this agenda forward: an important step will be to introduce legislation on the marine environment that balances conservation, energy and resource needs, and streamlines existing systems. We are already delivering on our rural manifesto, and have protected natural habitats and landscapes while securing the right to
roam and supporting rural livelihoods. I would now like you to look further ahead and develop an agenda for the next decade that protects and secures the rural economy and our environment for future generations.

You will also need to ensure we maintain high levels of animal health and welfare, and respond robustly both to the threat of new diseases – especially avian influenza – and to existing challenges such as bovine tuberculosis.

Obviously on both environmental and agricultural policy a great deal of your focus will be on working at the European Union level. I am sure you will continue Margaret Beckett's close working relationships both with other member states and the European Institutions. Effective contacts with European Commission and the European Parliament are vital to your Department. You will find our Labour MEPs a source of great expertise and influence, but it is important also to work with the other large groups such as the EPP and Liberals.

By the end of June, I would welcome your preliminary assessment of key challenges across your Department, including the key milestones and risks in each area, and the main actions you propose to meet these challenges. As a first step, I should be grateful for your views by the end of May on how you intend to allocate responsibility for key issues and objectives among your Ministerial team. I am keen that we make the very best use of our excellent team in Government.

Your plans will of course need to be set against the background of lower growth in funding than in recent years. This means the Zero Based and Efficiency Reviews currently underway, combined with Departmental Capability Reviews,
will be a critical input, and I would like you to give these your personal attention to ensure that the Department’s spending is effective and fit for purpose as we move forward.

Thank you for accepting this important and exciting post. I look forward to discussing it with you further.

May 2006