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OPINION

Breaking the vicious circle

AS an academic, I am immediately conscious that writing about bovine TB for a farming audience feels somewhat akin to putting my head above an insubstantial parapet.

Already, I have a sense that readers are waiting for me to mention the word 'badger', so they can work out which side of the culling argument I favour.

As a political scientist who works closely with natural scientist colleagues investigating livestock disease, I think this is a symptom of the real problem facing farmers and Government.

We only have to glance through the newspapers over recent weeks and months to see how polarised arguments over bTB have become. When do you ever see an article mentioning this disease that isn't primarily about badgers, portrayed either as victims or villains?

As in any argument where emotions run high, the more vociferous each side becomes, the more they drive each other to extremes. It almost seems as though the real issue – the health of cattle (and the well-being of the farmers) – has disappeared.

There is nothing new about arguments over badgers. Ambivalence about whether they are 'good' or 'bad' goes back into history and predates the crisis over bTB.

Badgers have often been seen as representing a positive connection with nature and the environment – and in recent



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times feature significantly in children's literature – while at the same time the 'rogue badger' is sinister and threatening.

So it is an iconic animal and, as the media now plays a more influential role in our lives, the badger is news. Press stories appear on the news pages, written by reporters looking for a scoop rather than by specialist science writers. Celebrities enter the fray.

This often results in emotive writing, rather than a genuine exploration of the issues and, in some newspapers, reinforces a particular political agenda.

In this polarised situation, it becomes difficult to see whether the media is reflecting the arguments or driving them.

If Government is to make any headway in addressing bTB, it has to break out of this vicious circle, which means focusing on the health of our national herd.

In my view, any strategy must include putting endemic disease on the agenda for responsibility and cost sharing. This may not go down well with farmers but there seems no logic in considering different livestock diseases in isolation.

We all know that when Defra took its eye off bTB testing during the foot-and-mouth disease crisis, it resulted in a surge of bTB cases later.

But at the same time, the new Government must be prepared to take a decisive lead, while acknowledging the evidence on bTB is incomplete. To be effective, Ministers have to make a policy that can react flexibly to changing circumstances.

There isn't going to be one simple answer and I think if both sides on the badger debate could step out of their bunkers they would acknowledge this.

Looking to the future, we need a decisive plan of action now, and that can only happen if we have a full and unemotional debate, examining all aspects of the problem and all potential solutions.

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